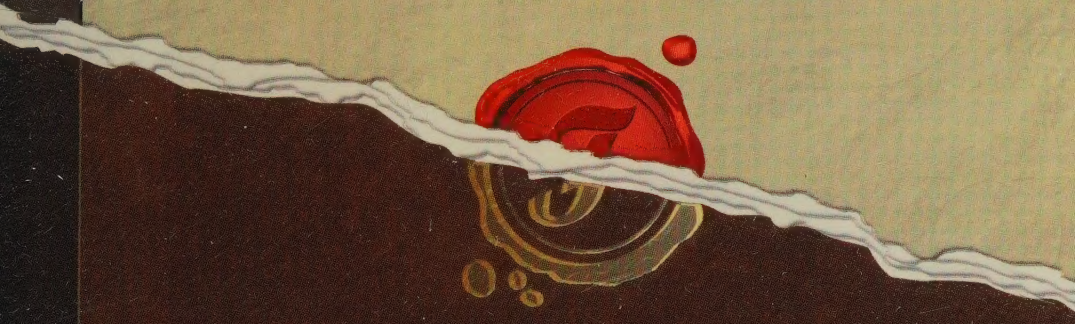
CLASSIC REPRINT SERIES

THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING

An Essay on Christian Fellowship



by

Elizabeth Sophia Fletcher

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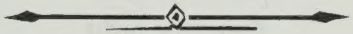

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THE

METHODIST CLASS-MEETING:

AN ESSAY ON CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

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METHODIST CLASS-MEETING:

AN ESSAY ON CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

BY

ELIZABETH SOPHIA FLETCHER,

AUTHOR OF "MIRIAM'S CHOICE," "ADAM'S ARGUMENT," &c., &c.

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY JOHN H. JAMES, D.D.

"All ye are brethren."

LONDON:

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1873.

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Dedication.

TO

MY FATHER AND MOTHER.

WHATE'ER OF PRAISE THESE PAGES WIN,
THAT TAKE: IT IS YOUR OWN.
THE BLAME FOR ERRORS FOUND THEREIN
MUST FALL TO ME ALONE.

INTRODUCTION.

THIS little book owes its appearance to the following circumstances :

An offer was made some months ago of a prize of £100 for the best, or £50 each for the best two Essays on "The Class-meeting Essential to the Prosperity of Methodism." There were only a few competing essays, and the gentlemen who had undertaken the duty of adjudication were unanimously of opinion that no one or two of the essays had given full satisfaction in the treatment of the subject. The present essay—different originally in form, though not in substance, from what is now published—is one of two, to which, if the adjudicators were compelled by the terms of agreement to assign an award, £50 was granted. On the point as to whether the adjudicators had power to refuse

any award, those gentlemen felt themselves incompetent to pronounce an opinion. The parties who had offered the prize or prizes were of opinion that such power was given to the adjudicators, and accepted their decision as against any award. This procedure has caused in some quarters not only disappointment but dissatisfaction; and the author of the present volume has determined to publish on her own account, and has asked me to write a short introductory notice. I do so with much pleasure. It is possible that many who read the essay may think it more thorough and satisfactory than did the adjudicators. None can deny to it the merit of very considerable acuteness, logical power, candour, and, at least on some parts of the subject, thoroughness too. I am half disposed to think that had the original draft been similar in form to the present book, it might possibly have been more favourably received. It will not be supposed that I agree with and endorse everything contained here. On the suggested methods of increasing the popularity and usefulness of the Class-meeting there is

room for much to be said on the other side. But everything that appears here on that point deserves most serious consideration; as also what is so suggestively and usefully said as to the principal causes of the apparent decline of this institution. And I am persuaded that this work will prove a valuable contribution to the literature of a subject which seems likely to assume—and that almost immediately—great prominence and importance in Methodist discussions.

JOHN H. JAMES.

LONDON, *May*, 1873.

CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I. PAGE

THE PRINCIPLE AND PURPOSE OF THE CLASS-MEETING 1

CHAPTER II.

HISTORIC VIEW OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP 43

CHAPTER III.

IS THE CLASS-MEETING A FAILURE? 67

CHAPTER IV.

FAULTS OF THE CLASS-MEETING; WITH HINTS FOR THEIR CURE 81

CHAPTER V.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN? 102

CHAPTER VI.

CULTIVATED CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIAN CULTIVATORS 120

THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING.

[illegible]

CHAPTER I.

THE PRINCIPLE AND PURPOSE OF THE CLASS-MEETING.

"CUSTOM without truth is but antiquity of error," says Cyprian. That principle of enquiry into established usage which he thus formulated, is applied in our day almost too freely. People are keen to attack custom, and often superficial, or altogether careless, in their estimate of the truth it encloses. It is using a very hackneyed phrase to say that these are times of enquiry into usage and precedent. Is it useful, economical, profitable, is asked of every system and institution that has descended to us from the past; and if the answer be negative we set ourselves to alter, remodel, and, as we hope, improve. Abolition and emancipation measures are tasks that many willingly undertake.

Bodies civic and bodies ecclesiastic alike have to bear the assaults of this spirit. Insignificance alone exempts. Even creeds and doctrines are not held superior to correction; how much less rubrics and tests? Methodism must, perforce, be content to

have her ordinances brought into the same searching light as other Churches. Nor need she regret this necessity. 'Tis well that her people should understand thoroughly the reasons, not only for their faith, but for their practice also, and should be able to give those reasons to any who enquire concerning them. Ignorance may be bliss; it is never safety. And, further, if reconstructions and adaptations are necessary, it will be well that they should be directed by the sage experience of the fathers in the community, rather than be left to unpractised hands.

Now there is one part of the Methodist system which has of late been discussed, criticised, upheld and impugned with a vigour that shows it to be no insignificant portion of the ecclesiastical machine. The Class-meeting, as a test of membership, is heartily denounced by one party and as heartily supported by another; while a third section tacitly depreciate it, or ignore it, more or less confessedly. Many who call themselves Methodists desire to abolish it altogether, and many others desire to be freed from all obligations to attend it. So far, the large majority is on the side of its supporters.

The question has been put—Is the Class-meeting

essential to the prosperity of the Church called Wesleyan Methodist? That question I now propose to answer, as well as I can.

Is the Class-meeting essential to the prosperity of Wesleyan Methodism? Another question conveys the reply. What was the first link in the chain of events that called forth Wesleyan Methodism, that made it a "Connexion" and a Church? Was it not the institution of the class?

Here we must pause to define our words. What do we mean by "prosperity," "essential," and "Wesleyan Methodism?" Let us settle this in the outset. By prosperity, then, I mean all that is conveyed in the words *growth*, *activity*, *harmony*. In speaking of essential things, I mean those which best feed this kind of life, things without which it would languish. And by Wesleyan Methodism I mean a fraternity, banded together under that name for purposes of mutual edification and aggressive religious action. Now, then, is the Class-meeting essential to the prosperity of Wesleyan Methodism?

In order fully to elaborate the answer given above, we must look at it in the light of those definitions. As we do so, it unfolds into several sections:—

I. First of all the principle and purpose of the Class-meeting demands some attention.

II. Next we may glance at the history of Christian fellowship.

III. Then inquire whether the Class-meeting be practically a failure, as is affirmed.

IV. Next, ask what are its faults, and how may they be cured or modified.

V. Consider whether our children and young people are gathered into the Church as they might be.

VI. Lastly, we may consider the arguments of cultivated Christians, and ask such persons if they are, as they should be, Christian cultivators.

When these six points have been dealt with, we shall have, it is to be hoped, a clear and intelligent answer to the question proposed.

And, firstly, as to the principle and purpose of the Class-meeting.

We are fond of claiming for the Christian religion in general, a welding and assimilating influence, and we are justified in so doing; but for what reason? Because the Church of God is a *society*, not a mass of disintegrated units; a *brotherhood*, not a system of worship only. "Christ, in des-

cribing Himself as a King, and at the same time as King of the Kingdom of God, claimed the character first of Founder, next of Legislator, thirdly, in a certain high and peculiar sense, of Judge, of a new divine society. . . . The object of this divine society is that God's will may be done on earth as it is in heaven."

"The thing proposed," says John Wesley, "is obvious to every one. They," the Methodists, "want to flee from the wrath to come, and to assist each other in so doing. They, therefore, unite themselves in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love." Here we have the character of the general Christian society, and of the Methodist section of it, clearly indicated. Interchange of thought and feeling, with special reference to the spiritual life; and the help and encouragement that spring from this exchange; these have been recognised from the very beginning as having their root in eternal truths.

The principle of fraternity is that on which the Class-meeting is based. Can it be maintained by anyone that this principle is either defunct or effete? Is it not, rather, asserting itself very vigorously just

now? Was there ever a period when "societies" flourished as they do to-day—and societies that affect some air of secrecy too? *Vehm-gerichts* are no more, certainly; but *Good Templars* and *Freemasons* have their lodges in every street. Both in secular and philanthropic affairs, as well as in religious concerns, the value of united action, and the obligation of brotherly help, are fully recognised.

That "no one is able of himself to rise out of the depths, but must clasp some outstretched hand," is as true now as it was when Seneca said it, and men show every day that they feel its truth. Societies of numberless kinds, whether Freemasons, Good Templars, Friendly, Insurance, or Co-operative, are established, and succeed, because they take as their foundation some want of mankind, and offer to all who feel that want the counsel, and encouragement and practical help, which only association can provide. No one can climb the Alps unaided. Guides, ropes, provisions, and many other things are needed by the climber. These organisations supply the ropes and ladders, and guides needful to aid men in the ascent of the Alps of Temperance, or of social success, or whatever else they desire, and will league together to obtain. Single-handed, how will

you cross the crevasse or scale the height? You need comrades, ropes, alpenstocks, and without them will be lost.

It was on this ineradicable need of humanity that John Wesley built his societies, as, ages before, One far greater raised the first courses of the Christian Church. And Methodists of to-day glory in the fact that go where they may, to Fiji or to Hudson's Bav, they take with them everywhere letters of introduction to a company of persons like-minded with themselves in all essential religious matters, and ready to give them the hand of welcome. This is no small advantage.

No one who candidly views the condition of modern society can deny that the principle of fraternal association for the attainment of a desired end has been applied in a great variety of ways during the last twenty or thirty years. In matters secular its "sweet reasonableness" and great value have been and are widely apprehended. Can it be that it is less valuable in matters ecclesiastical? If so powerful in the repression of intemperance, is it useless for the promoting of Christian virtue generally? Shall we be ready to combine with our neighbours for purposes of economy and material

gain, yet hold that in the pursuit of infinitely higher objects every man should keep to himself, and follow in silence the Leader of the race? Nay, this gregarious instinct, forming, as it does, the basis of all our social and national life, is too much an integral part of ourselves to be used in so partial a fashion. By its very nature it must shape more or less all our dealings with our fellows. The law of fraternal intercourse and succour is that which gave birth to the Class-meeting; it is a law from which we can never separate ourselves; and it is, in the present times, manifesting itself very actively. What, then, of the objections which are made *on principle* to the Class-meeting and all kindred institutions?

Let us hear what our objectors have to say for themselves in regard to the philosophical basis for the Class-meeting which we have just put forward.

Their argument is something like this:

"We hold the Class-meeting to be the product of a period of excitement which has passed away and should have carried with it devices not suited to the calmer and riper age of the Church. Reformations are ushered into the world with many accompaniments that no one would wish to have

perpetuated. Churches, often, like individuals, are born in travail and distress, and make their existence known by cries and struggles. It was so with Methodism. The birth-throes of the new life were in some instances terrible to witness, and baffled all scientific investigation. No one desires or expects that these manifestations should continue. At the time they were esteemed horrifying and scandalous, and were only endured by the Wesleys because the hand of God seemed to be in them.

"Beside these extreme convulsions of a young principle labouring to establish itself, there are other manifestations, longer in their duration, not so startling in their operation, and therefore likely to be regarded as normal conditions. It seems to have been necessary, for getting the world's work done, so to constitute man that moderation in pursuit of any aim should be almost impossible to him. Too wide a view, too broad a sympathy would cramp a propagandist or reformer. From the philanthropist and the artist, down to the mechanic and the needlewoman, we all know that to gain an end we must centralise attention, and that—

" ' One master-passion, lab'ring in the breast,
Like Aaron's serpent, swallows up the rest.'

" Now we see this fully exemplified in the early days of all revolutions and reformations, from the Spartans to the Methodists. In a revival of religion the new converts are, for the time being, carried on the rush of a tide that bears them off from the courses of ordinary life. Business, recreation, domesticity, are comparatively ignored, and until the first swell of ardour has subsided religion is the sole thought and occupation. We see this clearly enough in the accounts we have of the infancy of Christianity; accounts which we may compare with those of the birth of Methodism. Would it be possible for us now to act as people did then? Could we attend five o'clock morning services, and go to church or chapel every evening?

" The work of life, in shop, factory, and house, must be carried on, and when the first intensity of enthusiastic zeal settles into the steady flame of maturing principle, the Church gradually drops these superabundant means of communion, and is content with fewer social religious exercises. We affirm that the Methodist Class-meeting is one of those transitory forms, adopted in a period of

extraordinary necessity, when men needed all the props they could make to themselves, and in their spiritual hunger craved food every hour of the day; but a form destitute of the elements which endow with permanent vitality, and exhibiting by this time unmistakeable signs of its inherent weakness, and more or less gradual decay.

"A celebrated writer has finely remarked:—'The religious sentiment, abandoned to itself, chose for itself moulds, in accordance with the time, which it broke when the time was no longer there.'

"We regard the Class-meeting as one of these moulds: a necessity and advantage once, in spite of its faults; unnecessary and undesirable now; and beginning evidently to break up and fall to pieces.

"The first converts of Methodism were gathered out of a population debased, illiterate, violent. They brought into their new mode of thought and life the uncultivated minds and unvarnished habits of the former period, only quickened and softened by the marvellous power of the Gospel; and they brought also the rough vigour of purpose native to them. A reticent, dignified, sober religious emotion, veiling itself from observation, holding

itself within the heart as within a shrine, too sacred for common sight, and shrinking from nothing so much as from 'a familiar clasp of things Divine'—*this* sort of religion was, in the very nature of things, utterly foreign to the Kingswood collier, the Nottingham weaver, or the Newcastle keelman. He burned to 'tell what God had done for his soul,' and to hear the same story from those who, like himself, had been plucked as 'brands from the burning,' or brought up 'out of the horrible pit and miry clay, and established upon the rock.' The public services were not enough to satisfy this spirit; it must have the Class-meeting. Nay, the Class-meeting proper was not enough; it craved the Band-meeting, wherein it could pour itself out entirely—its most personal trials, temptations, and faults.

"But now we have a state of things altogether different. We have persons educated in all the mental habits of an advanced civilisation, more or less cultivated, and more or less imbued with that sense of personal delicacy which is one result of culture. It is useless to require such persons as these to join a society whose rule is to ask 'as many and as searching questions as need be' of each

member concerning the temptations he has experienced and the sins he has committed.

"And yet the outer court of Methodism is daily receiving additions from this class of persons. They welcome the force and warmth of our pulpit discourses, and they would gladly join a Church that offers so many fields of Christian service to the laity; but through that gateway of the Class-meeting they cannot bring themselves to pass. And that is the sum of the whole matter.

"It remains with the Wesleyan Methodists, as a Church, to determine whether this 'mould,' which the time has already cracked and will soon break in sunder, is to be clamped together by the iron bands of routine and custom, until it become the coffin of the Church; or whether we shall take a bold free course, and, forswearing all shams and dead forms, accommodate our machinery to the work we have to do, and the material we have to deal with. We cannot make India muslins with the same apparatus that serves to turn out fustians.

"The advocates of the Class-meeting forget that in proportion as civilisation inoculates us we take less and less to eruptive confidences, and grow

more and more into the habit of reserve concerning our inner life.

"The argument from the craving supposed to be felt by men for communion in spiritual matters loses, in our opinion, much of its force, when we consider the great difference between the social position, the status, of a Methodist of any rank in the eighteenth century and that of a Methodist now. In the days when it was a disgrace to be a Methodist, those who joined the despised body were sure to cling to and confide in each other. When other friends, perhaps even the nearest relatives, stood aloof or joined in persecution, the heart turned to its brethren in the faith, and the classmate became the most trusted confidant, because in him only could sympathy be found. A common obloquy formed a common bond.

"But as these conditions changed, the action they caused was likely to change also. No longer hounded forth from all other society, Methodists no longer require so imperatively the stimulus and balm of each other's experience. No longer encountered on every hand by fiercely adverse influences, they no longer need such powerful prophylactics. As Methodism reformed manners, corrected

vice, secured its own footing, and forced respect from those who sneered but could not crush, it was creating a condition of society which should make much of its organisation unnecessary and even cumbersome.

"The spectacle presented by Methodism is one singular and striking. For more than a hundred years she grew with a rapidity that can be likened only to the growth of Christianity itself, and her outer courts are still filling quickly. But in regard to members of society the tide has turned. Everyone knows that more chapels, and elegant ones too, have been built during the last ten years than in any previous decade of the Connexion's history, and that in many instances these chapels have already become too small. Methodism gathers congregations on every hand, plants Sunday-schools and mission rooms thickly through the land, and strengthens every year its hold upon the people. But its accredited Church members are steadily decreasing. A paradox, indeed! Methodism presents to the world to-day the spectacle of a great city jealously closing its gates against those who desire to enter it, and to spend their wealth with its merchants."

Such is the argument against the philosophical basis which we have claimed for the Class-meeting. I have endeavoured carefully to elaborate it in order that it may the more effectively be refuted.

There are at the root of it three fallacies, so that whatever partial truth there may be in it, the conclusion is nullified altogether. These fallacies may be expressed thus :—

I. Our objector assumes that the character of the Methodist people is so completely changed as to make an ordinance of Christian fellowship distasteful to them.

II. He assumes that the fellowship of saints is only necessary or desirable while the saintliness is in its adolescence; and further, that disinclination to meet in class is the fruit of reaching a high state of Christian cultivation.

HI. He mistakes the true nature of the Class-meeting, confounding it with the band-meeting, from which it is altogether distinct. This mistake is very common, and very prejudicial. We will consider it when we come to speak of the faults of the Class-meeting.

Those who impeach the Class-meeting do so on the ground that Methodism having now passed its

initial stage its members neither seek nor require those frequent means of fellowship which were eagerly demanded at first; that self-investigating ordinances are at any time a doubtful advantage, and flourish only amongst uncultivated or morbid persons; and that as a community gains in culture more reticent forms of religious life become habitual to it. It is maintained that the Class-meeting is one of those moulds which the religious sentiment of a period chose out and made use of, but which that same religious sentiment, now that it has grown mature and dignified, will break and cast away, as no longer in accordance with the spirit of the times.

This sketch is not true to the entire mass of facts; nor does the specified result follow. The rule laid down by these objectors might, possibly, be made to apply if Methodism consisted entirely of persons on one level of culture and experience. But a Church is a composite mass of persons, all ages, all ranks, all temperaments, and receiving continually, if it be a living Church at all, numbers of fresh converts. This is the real condition of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Daily she gathers into her fold those who require stimulus, encouragement, direc-

tion; young people needing instruction, timid and weak people needing support and cheer, sad people wanting the cordial of Christian intercourse, lonely people who gladly hail an opportunity for friendly intercourse, and busy people who need some fixed means of grace which, because it is fixed, is attended to.

There is, unquestionably, considerable truth in the statement that the Methodists of to-day differ much from their ancestors. The question is, how do they differ, and in what manner do their differences affect religious life?

All grades of English society are blessedly different, in many particulars, from the social conditions of the last century. Education and refinement have spread on all sides, and the philosopher who has least faith in his race must confess that the England of 1873 is far above the England of 1743. Equally true is it that Methodism gathers many more of her people from the wealthy and cultured classes than she formerly did.

But it is necessary always to discriminate carefully between the principle of a system and the conduct of it. The latter may be extremely imperfect, the former unassailable. There are some moulds, such

as the Jewish ritual, which are intended only to serve the needs of a time, and then to be cast aside. There are others which, having their *raison d'être* in the perpetual needs of humanity can never be altogether dispensed with in any period of earnest and healthy religious life. In every period of the history of Christianity we see the craving for sympathy, direction, and fellowship, asserting itself. All forms of the Christian religion have more or less recognised and provided for it.

The subduing influence of civilisation and culture, adduced as an argument against Class-meetings, is somewhat over-estimated by those who use it. In its secret soul human nature recoils from much that goes by the name of civilisation, and is apt to show a good many knots which interfere considerably with the process of veneering. There are, after all, a great many half-civilised people in England, by which I mean people whose mental training is so imperfect that they are left with a propensity to talk freely of their private affairs and inner lives. Any minister or doctor can substantiate this remark. Nor is it applicable only to the peasant or artisan classes. It is perfectly true that culture induces reserve. But are Methodists yet cultured to such

a height that spiritual communion is impossible to them?

Is it not still correct to say that a silent, meditative, rapt form of religion makes no way at all amongst the working classes of England? Is it not equally correct to assert the same thing respecting the less wealthy sections of the middle class? And does not Methodism *mainly* recruit from these? As a Church for the masses she presents opportunities for homely hearty fellowship, and for practical finance, too effective to be lightly discarded or soon worn out.

I dare affirm that the majority of persons in our middle class, and the great bulk of persons in our labouring and artisan classes, are not yet civilised above the need for Christian fellowship. I hope, before concluding, to prove that none ought ever so to be. Scarcely anyone will deny that some religious ordinance during the week is needed by us all, as a rule. We can no more take in all our spiritual pabulum on the Sabbath than we can eat a week's food at one meal. It is one great error of our times that persons do endeavour to achieve this difficult feat. That some are compelled by circumstance to attempt it can never be held a valid argu-

ment for its propriety. It is a method entirely the opposite of the ideal Christian life. *That* sets before us a constant filial intercourse with the great Father as the happy birthright of every son of God, and points out that this life of communion must be fed by frequent association with those who are also cherishing it. Thus arise week-day services to supplement the worship of the Lord's-day.

And as it is impossible for the pastor of a church to give an hour every week, or even every month, if his church be large, to spiritual conversation with each member, a system which furnishes him with lay helpers, and enables him, at stated intervals, to meet all the members, in small groups of a dozen or so, for conversation and instruction, is surely one of great value!

Are Methodists of the present day too refined to relish Christian fellowship that brings them into contact with persons belonging to different grades of society? Are they too pious to need stimulus and advice? What sort of people are they for the most part?

Go into any one of the large towns of England, especially in the north, and walk down its streets, looking at the names above the shop doors, and on

office windows. Then take a walk into the suburbs, amongst the terraces inhabited by tradesmen, manufacturers, and professional people. In all probability, one half of the names you read, as you pass along, belong to persons who are more or less of Methodists.

Now, in these walks of life, the people are homely, social, and, for the most part, busy, knowing, by experience, many of them, the harder lessons of human life, and not yet civilised to the point of keeping all their private affairs locked up in a closet into which none are ever allowed to peep. Especially in the north of England, where Methodism flourishes best, may its adherents be thus described; at any rate, for the most part.

Take a person of this kind—say a tradesman, with a large business, or a merchant with many affairs. Say he is a man with a family growing up. Say, also, that he has established his status for himself, having begun life in a much humbler position than the one he now occupies. Here you have a man of many cares, with much to distract his thoughts, and with scanty opportunities for private meditation, and you put him into the Methodist society, and bid him, once a week, to

snatch an hour from his business pursuits, and his duties as a citizen, to meet with his fellow citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and refresh, by mutual prayer and counsel, a spirit overtasked and worn with the friction of temporal concerns. During the day he has been learning the shifty, dishonourable, perhaps, even vicious side of human nature. He comes, now, to learn how this may be more mingled than he had supposed with elements of good, and aspirations and struggles after purity. He has been striving to hold his own in the battle of life, and to win, honourably, a fair measure of prosperity—an endeavour which seems more difficult every year. He comes, now, to communicate his often-troubled musings on the ways of God to man, to hear the experience of other human hearts in the same great problem, and to invigorate his own spiritual life by this draught from "the brook by the way."

Or he has been visited by calamity. Loss of relatives, of friends, of wealth or reputation, has come upon him. All the deepest wildest questions of the human heart are racking his soul, and the awful loneliness of desolated mortality is blasting his life. If he be a communicative man, he comes

now to pour out his soul, and to find relief in so doing. If he be reserved, and unable to speak even a word of what he feels, must the silent conviction of sympathy, and the warm hand-clasp go for nothing? At least, he will gain, in Christian sympathy and prayer, an assurance that if God hath delivered others, He is able also to deliver Him, if he will but trust Him.

Lastly, when the sun of prosperity shines upon him—when he gains deliverance from famine, pestilence, peril, or temptation—when answers to prayer are given him, and difficulties are removed out of his path; then he can come to the gathering of God's people, and declare, with more or less explicitness, according to his natural habit, what God does for him; and can thus, in his turn, comfort the sad, and stimulate the fearful or weary.

Thus, so long as God makes His creatures diverse in their tempers, but alike in their joys and sorrows, man can help and counsel his fellow man.

To look at another branch of the same topic.

Consider the case of lonely people, of whom there are more in this crowded world than some of us are apt to suppose. Thousands of women

come under this category. "Man goeth forth to his work and to his labour until the evening," and, fatiguing as it may often be, taxing all his powers, he has, at any rate, the advantages arising from change of scene and variety of intercourse. His wife, on the other hand, while she has the real advantages of relief from occupations that endanger life and limb, of protection from weather, and other similar privileges, has often to accept, as their correlatives, monotony, and no inconsiderable measure of loneliness. A routine of small duties, seldom broken, is frequently the woman's lot—a lot which she has to endure under the weight of more or less physical hardship. The mother of a large family, in the less wealthy grades of middle-class life: we all know what this means. Multitudinous small details of household economy to remember, investigate, and arrange. Servants to correct and train—too often a thankless task. Children to train also, with due consideration of the various physical and mental organisations thus growing to maturity under one roof. The care of young children in their frequent ailments, and of older children in their forming habits, and increasing wants. Here is a kingdom requiring,

for its efficient government, the powers of a Maria Theresa and of a Florence Nightingale combined. What opportunities are there in this life for due relaxation, or for secluded meditation? If this woman cannot commune with God as she goes about the house, works the sewing-machine, or sits amongst her children, she will have but scanty opportunities for doing it otherwise. Even the Sabbath, by many a mother, has to be spent in the nursery or the sick-room. Many women, in the grades of society below the salt, get but rarely to a place of worship during the middle portion of their lives, when the duties of motherhood are most confining; Sunday being a day when husband and sons like a hot dinner, and when the servant—if there be one—demands her evening out.

But an hour in the week, during the afternoon, or at night when the children are in bed, can better be secured; and, if made part of the order of life, something which is *binding*, it will, with some measure of regularity, be attended to. The harassed mistress, ground down with many a worry and vexation known only to herself, having no leisure, and little heart, for recreation, oppressed by numberless physical annoyances, the portion

of her sex, and left very much to herself from one week to another: such a person as this must find it a great benefit to be now and then taken out of her own house for an hour, and enabled to refresh her spirit by change of scene and intercourse. Fellowship with those who have heavier burdens and fewer alleviations than herself, who are poorer, sicklier, less beloved, less cared for, will send her back to her sacred labours with a sigh of patient thankfulness and hopeful courage, while she feels that He, who was born of a woman, has sent her, through the voices of His people, a message of encouragement and exhortation: "Daughter, what wilt thou that I should do unto thee?"

So much for the first objection chronicled. What of the second—that a distaste for an ordinance of Christian fellowship is the natural result of a high state of cultivation amongst Christian people; and is not to be reproved?

As I write these words there comes to my mind a brief sentence from the little book called *Gates Ajar;* a sentence very apposite to the point under discussion.

"Untrained Christians in any sect will always

have their eccentricities and littlenesses, at which the silken judgment of high places, where the Carpenter's Son would be a strange guest, will sneer. That never troubles me. It only raises the question in my mind, whether cultivated Christians generally are sufficiently *cultivators*, scattering their golden gifts on wayside ground."

This places the matter before us in its truest and most powerful light. It is no small part of the mission of Methodism to bring together different ranks of society, that rich and poor, illiterate and informed, may learn each other's merits and faults, advantages and trials, and the religion of all be made more liberal and sympathetic. It is not good for classes, any more than for individuals, to live alone. It is good for the learned and unlearned to meet together, that the narrowness and ignorance of the one may be enlightened, and that the other may learn that there are things which are "hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes." The man of thought and speculation, or of worldly wisdom, may often learn a lesson of simple practical faith from the shrewd unlettered peasant.

John Foster, in his essay on the aversion of men

of taste to evangelical religion, draws attention to the striking difference between the schools of philosophy and the Christian society. The former were composed of men whose superior faculties and extensive accomplishments enabled them to discuss their favourite themes with dignity and eloquence. "They attracted refined and aspiring spirits by proclaiming that the temple of *their* goddess was not profaned by being made a rendezvous for vulgar men."

We all know the result of this. Society became divided. There was one creed for the vulgar, another for the cultured. The poor and illiterate, left to themselves, made of their religion a superstition, and turned back, too often, to seek distraction in the vilest sensuality. The fires of burning Rome may well be to us a beacon of warning against this fatal division between the lives of patrician and plebeian.

To a world thus confused and wandering, Christianity came with a voice that was to them that were afar off and to them that were nigh, with words of love and instruction that were equally for bond and free, for Jew, Roman, Greek, and barbarian. For this very reason it was to the

polished Greek and the proud Roman a stumbling-block and foolishness. Even Pharisees and Sadducees could not abide that the cursed people who knew not the law should be as dear to God as themselves. The brotherhood of the human race was a doctrine unknown to the ancient pagan world. Hebrews had been taught by Moses some measure of the fraternal law, which Christ was fully to enunciate, but the Sermon on the Mount was almost as new a gospel to the Jew as it was to the Roman. At last, the uncultured and the simple heard of a philosophy that employed the hierarchies of heaven yet was to be their own possession; of a religion "expressly sent to the class which philosophies had always despised." If Christianity means anything at all, it means the union of all classes in one body, for one purpose.

"But it is not to be denied," says Foster, "that the natural consequences follow. . . . In taking such a dwelling the religion seems to imitate what was prophesied of its Author, that when He should be seen there would be no beauty that He should be desired. . . . *But no passion that has become predominant is ever cooled by anything which can be associated with its object, while the object itself con-*

tinues unaltered. The passion is even willing to verify its power, and the merit of that which interests it, by sometimes letting the unpleasing associations surround and touch the object for an instant, and then chasing them away. . . . The thing itself is close to the mind, and therefore the causes which would have misrepresented it by coming between have lost their power."

I submit that these words are a forcible utterance of truth, not only in a general regard to the Christian religion, but also particularly in regard to many of the ordinances of that religion.

Robertson defines the Church as a company of persons "more united to each other because more united in God." If this be so, it negatives many of the arguments advanced against ordinances of Christian fellowship. "*Attachment must burn in oxygen, or it will go out,*" says Foster again; "and by oxygen I mean a mutual admiration and pursuit of some interesting concern. . . . Human society is a vast circle of beings on a plain, in the midst of which stands the shrine of goodness and happiness, inviting all to approach; and as the attached pairs advance they will, like radii from the circumference to the centre, continually become closer to each

other, as they approximate to their mutual and ultimate object."

"We cannot kindle when we will,
The fire that in the heart resides.
The spirit bloweth, and is still,
In mystery our soul abides;
But tasks in hours of insight willed
Can be through hours of gloom fulfilled."

Now, in a large number of cases, religious meetings, in great measure, supply the "hours of insight" which work on "through hours of gloom." Some find it equally, or, perhaps, even more profitable, in one sense, to sit quietly in their own chambers, and to read a page of Scripture, and of some favourite devotional author, than to attend any gathering whatsoever, where they must consort with others. Their "hours of insight" come to them in solitude.

"From the world of sin and noise,
And hurry, they withdraw,
For the still and inward voice
They wait, with silent awe."

But necessary as this is in some measure, for all, in greater degree for others, it certainly does not abolish the fact that the larger number of the souls existing in this world need frequent stimulus *from*

without. If genius may be defined as "the power of lighting its own fire," it must certainly be allowed that mediocrity requires help in kindling its flame of holy purpose and vigorous resolve. And if this be true, that the mass of human beings require the grasp of a human hand, the cheer of a human voice, to nerve them for struggle, and to kindle their courage for conflict, then is the duty of the Church plain before her. Nearer to God—kindlier to our brethren in the family of God. And to any who endeavour to live above the level of the multitude, and who feel conscious of possessing wider insight, we can offer no other conclusion than this:—Show your superiority by your firm adhesion to proved principles, by your grasp of that which is good, and by your endurance of outside knots and roughnesses. What is your superiority worth, if it cannot do that?

True,

> "No man can save his brother's soul,
> Or pay his brother's debt;"

and there is, perhaps, in our day, a tendency on the part of many to think that they can shunt the responsibility of their final state on to the Church.

There are many who would have to confess, did they speak their thoughts, that they tacitly affirm—

> "The minister must save our souls,
> The leader pay our debts."

They are vast believers in the question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" for they always put themselves in the place of the brother, and cry out lustily for a keeper. They demand to be coddled into rèligion, looking upon it, apparently, as a speculation which they embark in for the benefit of the clergy, rather than for any other reason.

But this is quite a different matter, and in no degree invalidates our argument. We are not absolved from the great duty of unselfishness, because it may cause others to calculate upon our ready helpfulness. "*Power*, to the very last particle of it, *is duty*." If, by fellowship in spiritual affairs, we can strengthen and comfort our comrades, we are bound to join in that fellowship, for their sakes, if not for our own.

"Now, therefore," says Saint Paul, "ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God."

This idea of citizenship justifies all that has been said. If we are fellow-citizens we must gather together to transact the affairs of our city, to hold counsel regarding its welfare, and to explain and enforce its laws. The very word implies brotherhood and mutual service. The good citizen is not the man who wraps himself up in his pride, and thinks he has no need of social helps, and feels no obligation to render them. We do not give that name to the man who selfishly seeks his own ease, without regard to his neighbour's satisfaction. Everybody knows what is meant by the phrase, "a good neighbour." What are the qualities implied therein? Sullen seclusion, cold taciturnity, persistent unhelpfulness? Would the phrase be used of one who had never spoken a friendly word, or offered help in the hour of need; who had stood aloof alike through the sombre days of rain and the jocund days of sunshine, through winter's floods and summer's droughts? Do we not rather give the name to those who have met us with cordial words and ready hands: who have strained their own resources to meet the failure of ours: whose helpful sympathy did not shrink from us when fever dwelt in our household or blight deso-

lated our fields: and to whom we, in turn, have rendered like offices of kindly intercourse.

And if this be true of the earthly, how much more of the heavenly? The good citizen is he who identifies himself with the corporate body, and holds himself bound in all matters to consider the general weal. And surely we do not lessen, but increase, the force of this law when we apply it to the spiritual life!

How could any borough be governed, and the welfare of its inhabitants secured, if every citizen averred that his private occupations left him no time for council or committee meetings; that indeed these things were apt to ruffle him and make him feel uncomfortably excited; that sometimes discussions took place which were not particularly improving; that his family liked him to spend his leisure hours with them; and that, in short, he preferred to keep to himself?

Do we not give our homage to the man whose private business, however exacting, is not suffered to prevent him from being active on behalf of his fellows; whose domestic concerns, even when painful and harassing, are not permitted wholly to absorb him, whose personal feelings and tastes,

though fastidious and retiring, are over-ruled when they would counsel the evasion of an evident duty. And these, frequently, are the men who do best service to the commonwealth.

It is difficult to imagine that the method of Christian life described in the first six verses of the last chapter of the Epistle to the Galatian Church is fully exemplified in public worship, and the communion of the Lord's table; because the latter, at any rate, as now carried out, gives no opportunity for that personal intercourse which is the root-thought of the Apostle's argument. In this, as in many other portions of the Asian Epistles, we have put before us a *household* life as the model for the Christians to keep ever before them. "Condescend to men of low estate;" "Follow after things whereby one may edify another;" "Let him that is taught in the word communicate;" "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ;" says Saint Paul, and in using these words we feel that he must have referred in thought and intention to that "new commandment" which the Master gave in the upper room at Jerusalem, immediately after His significant washing of the disciples' feet, and just before His

personal abode amongst them ceased for ever on earth.

At that moment, when petty vanities manifested themselves once more, as they had so often done in past days, the Master, looking forward to that swiftly approaching hour of which the disciples were as yet unconscious, when, in their loss of His visible presence, they would need to cling more closely and tenderly to each other—in that moment of supreme yearning and profound exhortation, Christ says, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another."

Not the old Jewish law that brought men to the temple thrice a year and remanded them to intervening months of isolation and self-dependence. Not this, but a law of brotherhood and helpful unity, of fraternal household charities, demanding free opportunities for speech and action. A commandment that binds the strong to nourish and fortify the weak, and the instructed to seek after and elevate the ignorant. A law carved thus in uneraseable characters over the gateways of the church of Christ: "Rejoice with them that do rejoice and weep with them that weep."

It has been said that the persecutions to which

the early Methodists were subjected made them cling to each other, and fostered the extension of the Class-meeting and band-meeting. That there is truth in this view no one will deny. But does it prove that because Methodists are no longer compelled, as a people, to face violent persecution, therefore serious difficulties and temptations never beset their path, rendering mutual intercourse a benefit?

Is it to be assumed that all social religious exercises will be confined to the early days of a church's history, and that when the first flush of youthful ardour is past, all loving intercourse will cease? As love burns steadier and fuller, does it come at last to require no oil?

But to dwell no further on that. We should be glad if we could believe that society has gained a level which would make it easy for every one to carry out religious convictions unassailed. It would be well for us if opposition to Christianity were as rare as some would maintain.

But persecution and opposition take many and subtle forms. The icy sneer of the drawing-room or the club may still be seen on the one hand, and the coarse laugh of the workshop and the street

corner heard on the other. Men and women who have not God in their thoughts, will always, I fear, be ready to throw stones in the path of those who are better minded.

I wish it were certain that spiritual truths had so completely leavened English life that no young fellow, in any rank, need fear to see the curling lip, or hear the cynical taunt, or be met by the violent scoff, when he refuses to enter into questionable recreations, or to soil himself by contact with vice.

I wish it were true that every employer in this land were so Christian himself that no workman or servant need fear the least hindrance to his or her pursuit of the highest good; need shrink from expressing conviction on any point.

Would that it were possible to believe that the conduct of so-called Christians is always such as can place no grievous difficulty in the way of the young and the weak, and that they were all of one mind as to the criminality or folly of actions that, as it is, are condoned and frequently practised.

And oh! how earnestly is it to be wished that our teachers, and leaders of thought, our men of science, our poets, our orators, our artists, were all agreed never to "mix falsehood with the true;"

never to "make the worse appear the better reason;" never to throw the gold and purple of their genius round the loathsome nakedness of vice, and deck her forth in seeming innocence and beauty.

But I know that the real nature of things is yet far from answering to these desires. With all our advance in social virtue and decency, and in spiritual earnestness, there is yet abundant reason why those who fear the Lord and those whom we desire to draw into the fear of Him, should "speak often one to another."

> "The world is too much with us, late and soon,
> Getting and spending we lay waste our powers."

The strongest of us need refreshment and stimulus, and the clearing of our spiritual vision now and again; the weak, the fearful, and the young need it even more. How can this be secured without some method analogous to the Class-meeting?

"I believe one Catholic and Apostolic Church."

Who does not?

"I believe in the communion of saints."

Who does not?

How to realise these lofty conceptions?—that has been the inquiry of every earnest Christian from Saint Paul onwards. "In our opinion," says one forcible writer, "the Class-meeting, more than any other human institution, has realised the great idea of the unity of the Church and the communion of saints. And by making this the foundation of his system, Wesley secured the prosperity and permanence of his work. It was a stroke of genius, or, rather, it was one of those providential indications which he so well knew how to turn to account. . . . It kindled everywhere new fires of religious life which could, if necessary, become self-feeding, and maintain an independent existence. It is a realisation of that fraternal fellowship so well understood in the Apostolic age, and so deplorably neglected in our own."

CHAPTER II.

HISTORIC VIEW OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

ASSOCIATED spiritual life is a feature of the Christian Church that appears in it at its birth, and is never lost in any age. There can be no doubt that the assemblies of the first Christians were of a free family kind. The nearest approach to them, in these days, is to be found, not in the liturgical worship of Episcopalians, nor even in the extempore service of the Nonconformist or Presbyterian, but in the Methodist fellowship meeting.

Assembling, as those first converts did, in each other's houses, drawn by one powerful sympathy, and eager to drink largely of the waters of the new life, they came together to build each other up in a sense we can scarcely realise, and their worship was informal and varied. Once a week, at least, they communicated. Indeed, at first, they did so every evening, the celebration of the Lord's Supper being taken in connection with an ordinary meal. Then the celebration was transferred to the morning

service of the first day of the week, and the love-feasts, the Agapæ, became a separate institution, which brought rich and poor together in fellowship more close than the other Church assemblies gave opportunity for.

"They continued steadfastly in the Apostle's doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Such was the practice of those three thousand who, on the day of Pentecost, were added to the disciples of the Lord; and the need which they then felt for the help that came of frequent intercourse was no mere temporary craving. It lasted; and, in the third century, we find the Agapæ still flourishing.

Not without cavils and misrepresentations, for which, possibly, there might be some cause. The heathen world had a special dislike to these love-feasts, and were industrious in circulating scandalous descriptions of them. Other influences, also, in course of time, operated to extinguish them. The simple, brotherly spirit of the first converts became corrupted. Old Pagan customs, and love of this world, re-asserted themselves. The obliteration of earthly ranks, the mingling of

masters and servants, freedmen, slaves, and patricians, at one table, became offensive to the awaking pride of those whose Christianity had not the same simple brotherly tone that distinguished the converts of earlier days. The Agapæ became too often occasions for display and preference, and so lost their value altogether. Unless they were a family gathering, and promoted brotherly sympathy, they were worse than useless.

Another cause operated to repress these fellowship gatherings. "They were frowned down in proportion as the priestly element gained ascendancy in the Church." This is a significant coincidence. From the fourth to the seventh century the councils waged slow, but progressive warfare against the Agapæ, until at last the council of Trullo absolutely forebade them, and attached the penalty of excommunication to the decree.

But that which springs from the soul's deep need of God will ultimately defy the devil, whether he work by worldliness or sacerdotalism. The communion of saints, which the Apostle's Creed—that most ancient Christian formula of belief—confesses, is not to be rooted out by any councils whatsoever.

The beginning of the fourth century witnessed

the revival of the spirit of fellowship in a new and unexpected form, that was destined to endure until our own day, and to exercise a mighty power in Christendom. There appeared in Egypt an individual who gave to monastic life a systematic shaping, evolving from the solitary existence of the ascetic and hermit, the associated life of the cœnobia or monastery. The hermit life, founded by Anthony, and which was the first form adopted by asceticism, was a life of isolation. The Anachorets, whose Lauræ were scattered over the Egyptian deserts, usually lived under one superior from whom they sought direction in spiritual affairs, but each man had his separate cell, and lived, for the most part, to himself. And many there were who rushed away into some grotto of utter solitude, far from the haunts of other men.

But this was the first impulse of asceticism, and, in a great measure, a transitory one. Running wild, as the Anachorets did, into extravagances of every kind, they ended, often, in complete isolation, in wild solitary struggles and visions, and, not unfrequently, in madness or suicide. "The eremitical life," as Basil of Cæsarea observes, "conflicts with the essential character of Christian love, since

here each individual is concerned only for what pertains to his own good; while the essence of Christian love prompts each to seek, not alone what serves for his own advantage, but also the good of others." The very extravagances and pitifulnesses of the hermit madness are an argument for the necessity of communion. The hermit life was a mould which the times soon broke; monasticism has shared the same fate. They were both imperfect attempts to realise a great ideal, and were mixed with errors that wrought decay; but the principle that guided Pachomius, in his establishment of monasteries, was a true one, and will last. He felt that to live merely for the promotion of his own growth was to live in opposition to the spirit of Christianity; that he must aim also to edify his brethren in the faith. This ideal the hermit life opposed. That, like a fever madness, seized upon society for a while, and, in its own fury, spent itself. There are no wilder, sadder tales in the long chronicle of human error than are told of those who fled away from the voluptuous cities of Asia and Africa into the Syrian or Egyptian wilderness, and there battled in utter solitude with the rank imaginations of a nature let

loose upon itself in all the vigour of an untamed animal organisation, and haunted by the memories of Pagan sensuality.

The hermit life failed thus, as it was sure to do, but the purer spirits saw, in monasticism, features which corresponded to the ideal they cherished. They saw, in conventual and monastic life, a means of cultivating that brotherly union and helpfulness which the Agapæ were intended to foster, and for that reason they encouraged the establishment of the cœnobia. These were, at first, "little communities, in which every kind of Christian activity and virtue found room for exercise, with the exception only of such as are strictly connected with the ties of family. People of all ranks might here associate together, and find a suitable occupation, sanctified by the spirit of Christian fellowship. Prayer, reading of Scriptures, sacred music, here alternated with, and accompanied, bodily labour. The bond of Christian fellowship united together what was separated by the relations of the world. . . . The cloisters, moreover, were institutions of education."

It was this, the realisation, which Monasticism seemed to offer, of the spirit of Christianity in

regard to fellowship, that commended it to many thoughtful and earnest minds of that age. Augustine long cherished an ideal of an association of like-minded men who, by renouncing the world, and throwing their possessions into one store, should band together in the pursuit of truth. After his conversion "this ideal Platonic association was supplanted in his mind by the idea of that primitive Apostolical community at Jerusalem which he strove after, and which, when he became acquainted with Monasticism, he supposed he found there once more restored."

But Augustine, and all other sensible men, perceived clearly enough the evils of Monasticism, and by reprehending idleness and liberty sought to establish the system on a safe and durable foundation. Monasticism, more than any other institution of the age, realised their ideal of Christian fellowship, but they were not blind to the fact that it separated between the monk and the layman, assigning to the former a higher vocation than to the latter. The danger of this was evident, and they laboured to avert it.

That they did not succeed was due to the one-sidedness of the monastic scheme. It withdrew

men from the world instead of banding them together in it. The ideal for the Christian man to adopt is not that of the monk shut up in the monastery cell, illuminating his missal, but that of the Knight Templar, wearing the badge of his order, bound in fealty to his brotherhood, and ready, at any moment, to do battle for the oppressed.

Monasticism was an effort, but a mistaken one, to realise the fraternal principle of Christianity. It is a proof that in matters religious as well as in matters social man is governed by a gregarious instinct. This instinct, when defied and overridden, takes its revenge by tormenting him with frightful visions, and often by driving him, mad and reckless, to riot in all license: as happened to some of the hermits in the first ages, and to not a few monks in subsequent times.

No system demanding perpetual vows, and separation from natural ties, can claim commission from heaven. So far as monastic life was pure it had, doubtless, its part in the divine education of the human race, and did, in its day, serve many important purposes; but it was a tremendous mistake, and became, therefore, a fearful curse. It was

a mould which divine Providence had to break when men made it too foul for further use. God preserve the world from ever attempting to piece it together again! In these days, when monastic establishments can never be, what they once were, in combination, the seminaries, the libraries, the hospitals and the hostelries of the world, their inherent vices are made more dangerous even than of yore.

Their great fault, as we observed just now, was that they speedily fell, by their very constitution, into the mischief they were designed to avert. They formed the distinction which they were meant to abrogate. The equality of men in Christianity, the equal value of all souls in God's sight was what the apostles and fathers laboured to establish. The duty resting on each man to aid his fellows, irrespective of all earthly ranks, was the lesson upheld by the Agapæ of the first ages. When Monasticism endeavoured to teach these truths it so expressed them as to convey the notion of a lower and higher religious life—one for the married and the busy, another for the monk or the nun. The master's prayer was utterly forgotten. Men and women were taught that in order to escape *being*

of the world they must escape *out of* it. Monasteries, in their palmiest days, when they were doing great service to the world as universities and refuges, were yet teaching her this fatal distinction, which hardened many souls into fatal unconcern, and wrung many others with terrible doubts. The large masses of the people were left to live out their days as well as they could, in the midst of all debasing influences, and separated from the purifying presence of the more devout and earnest.

So far, in ecclesiastical history, the realisation of Christian fellowship, in a form safe and durable, remained to be achieved.

We come now, following the history of the Church, to the Moravians. Did they achieve the long desired and oft-attempted good?

More perfectly, I think, since they admitted the sanctity of natural inclinations, while they sought to bind all the individuals of a community in one unselfish union. But their system was too monastic in its character to be perfectly admirable. The Moravian communities were *cœnobia*, with the addition of family relationships. They were based upon the entire withdrawal *from* the world of those who desire to live *above* it; upon a thoroughly

Romish view of the duty of laying bare the inner life to certain spiritual advisers; and upon conditions of obedience and self-renunciation no less thoroughly Romish. Those who joined them gave up their individuality as entirely as did the monk on entering the cloister. Marriage and family life were tolerated, but only under restraint, as it were. Husband and wife were frequently separated in those spiritual exercises which ought to have brought them together. The unmarried were so rigidly kept apart, that healthy intercourse, and real knowledge of each other, must have been impossible. In brief, the natural inclination of men and women to seek each other's society, and to make choice of each other, was regarded as a questionable instinct, requiring the most minute supervision; the will of the community decided everything, even the most delicate and tender personal matters; the will of the individual was sunk. This is Monasticism under another name, and with a very slight difference of setting.

Moravianism made no great number of converts, but it did, and is still doing good faithful work in missions and in education. To it, we, as Methodists, owe a debt, for it gave John Wesley the light

which brought to maturity his own spiritual life, and through him quickened a nation to religious earnestness. From the Moravian system John Wesley drew that conception of a religious society which he reproduced in a form infinitely more useful and enduring

Thus, in our historical survey of Christian fellowship we stop, at last, before our own system, and ask in admiration, if anything so adapted to humanity, so simple, yet so effective, and, on the whole, so satisfactory, can be found anywhere else, in the long track of history, or on the wide plain of the present.

It is often said that England was in her season of deepest November as a nation when Wesley and his coadjutors went forth at God's call to regenerate her. But the tide was already turning when the Holy Club first met at Oxford. The Spirit Divine was moving upon the face of the deep, and stirring the slimy abyss with the powers of a new life. Apparently, however, it lay in all its hideous corruption, a very hell of shameless vice and brutality, when the irresistible operation of a divine afflatus sent forth the Wesleys to call their perishing nation to repentance and purity.

There were already in London a few small religions societies, which had been discovered by the Moravians, and either joined to their body or conducted by some members of it; but which owed their origin to the action of certain clergymen. These, having a number of newly-awakened young people to provide with spiritual instruction and stimulus, formed them into little companies that should meet once a week and hold converse on topis connected with religious life. These little societies were in the habit of raising funds for almsgiving, by means of weekly contributions, and they also established schools for the education and reformation of children. But the latter were almost defunct when Wesley began his mission. He himself, on his return from Germany, joined one of the societies met by Moravians. But these societies were not the model for the Methodist Class-meeting. In shaping his societies, Wesley was led, by necessity, from one invention to another, and had no fixed model from which he worked. Both the history of the rise of Methodism and a perusal of the rules for the Moravian bands convince us that Wesley had no thought of establishing something that should copy Moravianism.

He was led on from one arrangement to another without perceiving at the time what he was doing. Only afterwards, when he reflected upon it, did he perceive "that this was the very thing which existed from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times those whom God sent forth 'preached the Gospel to every creature.' And the body of hearers were mostly either Jews or heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth as to forsake sin and seek Gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met these 'catechumens' apart from the congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort, and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities."

"This, and this alone," Mr. Wesley proceeds to say, "is Christian fellowship. But, alas! where else is it to be found? Look east or west, north or south; name what parish you please. Is this Christian fellowship there? Rather, are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things? What watching

over each other's souls? What bearing of one another's burdens?" These forcible questions were applicable enough to the England of 1739. Are they quite destitute of point in regard to the England of to-day?

Very soon a further development of these weekly assemblies showed itself. Some of the members so misconducted themselves as to bring a scandal upon the society. The Wesleys were not men to endure this without seeking a remedy; but, as the history says,* "the people were scattered so wide in all parts of the town, from Wapping to Westminster, that I could not easily see what the behaviour of each person in his own neighbourhood was. So that several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprised of it."

The way out of this difficulty presented itself unexpectedly, and in connection with a different matter. At Bristol there was a question of raising funds to meet some liabilities incurred by the society, and a certain Captain Foy threw out a suggestion for doing this by dividing the whole society into groups of twelve, each group to be regularly collected from by one of its members,

* Vol. VIII, p. 248, et seq., Mr. Wesley's *Works*, 8vo. edit.

who should be styled the leader. The value of this suggestion soon revealed itself to Wesley's mind. "I perceived," he says, "that this was the very thing we had wanted so long." He immediately caused the scheme to be adopted, not only for the financial purpose which first suggested it, but for the yet more important purpose of supervising, in spiritual matters, the members of the infant society.

But this arrangement speedily led to another. Visiting was found laborious and difficult. A more private interview was required than could always be had. The desirability of a meeting of the members of each class was felt, and accordingly such meetings were instituted, though not, at first, without some little opposition. Their advantages, however, were so manifest, that they became the general practice. Here, then, we have the Methodist Class-meeting. It is in no sense a copy of the Moravian band. This latter was adopted by Mr. Wesley, and very extensively used by the early Methodists; but it was always optional, and quite distinct from the Class-meeting.

Not just at first was the value of Foy's scheme perceived. Its financial usefulness was at once

seen; but when some of the newly-appointed "leaders" came to John Wesley, and told him that in collecting the weekly monies they had discovered grave faults of conduct in such and such persons, he was struck with the conviction that here was the very machinery which had been so long desired; something already in operation, simple, easy, and efficient. "A method," as he afterwards said, "for which we have had cause to bless God ever since."

This new element speedily expanded itself, and became the engine-piston of the entire machinery. The leaders, who were at first only collectors of monies, became spiritual visitors; the classes became meetings; the system of quarterly tickets was adopted; stewards and other officers were appointed. Thus the system grew.

Southey gave currency to the notion, and it is more prevalent and more mischievous than some of us may perhaps think, that the Methodist Class-meeting is an exact transcript of the Moravian Band-meeting. A comparison of the respective rules for the classes and bands will thoroughly dissipate this illusion. It is not necessary to go minutely into the great differences between the

two. The rules can be easily obtained and compared by any reader who does not sufficiently remember their nature. The chief practical differences are these :—

The Class is a mixed assembly of from twelve to forty persons.

The Band-meeting was a gathering of not more than five, all of one sex and similar condition—married or single.

The Class is strikingly unfettered, the only conditions absolutely binding being these :—That, besides ordinary morality, each member shall feel a desire to be saved from his sins, and shall meet as regularly as possible. The leader's duty is to inquire of each in turn, "how their souls prosper" —*the only question he can put*—and to give such advice as he may deem needful.

The Band-meeting, on the other hand, was regulated by a code of a very different character. *It was not compulsory*, but those who did adopt it were bound to use the rules from which these are a selection :—

The fourth—

"To speak, each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our souls, with the faults

we have committed in thought, word, and deed, and the temptations we have felt, since our last meeting."

The sixth—

"To desire some person among us to speak his own state first, and then to ask the rest, in order, as many and as searching questions as may be, concerning their state, sins, and temptations."

And the following four questions were to be put to each member at every meeting:—

"What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?

"What temptations have you met with?

"How were you delivered?

"What have you said, thought, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?"

Now, if these amazing regulations were the rules of the *Class-meeting*, that institution would certainly never have engaged the advocacy of the present writer. But they are the rules of esoteric societies within the exoteric one; of societies which no Methodist, from the beginning, has been compelled to join; societies which died a natural death long ago. I imagine that it would be impossible, to-day, to find one solitary specimen of

the *Bands* in the whole of the United Kingdom. The Class-meeting is a widely different ordinance.

But the public is very apt, following Southey's blundering steps, to lump the two ordinances together, and to cry, with virtuous horror—"Don't ask me to join a society in which I shall be asked once a week 'as many and as searching questions as need be' concerning my most personal matters, the sacredly delicate conflicts, trials, and doubts of my inner life. You are mad to ask it, and I do not wonder to hear Southey exclaim with indignation, What man would suffer his wife or daughter to join this society?'"

As *none* of these much objected-to rules have *anything to do* with the *Class-meeting*, which is the present test of membership in the Methodist Church, we need dwell upon them no longer.

It is objected against Methodism that she is like unto a city closing its gates on those who would fain enter, and spend their wealth with its merchants. Let us rather compare her to a city, stately and well-ordered, with wide open gates, buttressed walls, and fair, regular streets, where all are free to build and dwell, so they do but comply with the regulations of the city council. We all

know what comes of allowing a town to grow up higgledy-piggledy, without any of those wise and proper restrictions as to width of street, height of buildings, and regular plan of roads, which are necessary, if a place is to be pleasant in the eyes of its inhabitants, and convenient for all classes. Who cannot point to some uncouth place where every man has been permitted to build as seemed good in his own eyes, producing an inevitable result of deformity and inefficiency? Better have a small well-ordered city than ever so huge a conglomeration of hideous buildings and tortuous streets.

The following circumstances will fitly conclude this chapter on the historical aspect of Christian fellowship. They prove, I think, that other Churches feel the need of some machinery analagous to the Class-meeting. Shall the Methodists forsake their colours, after a century and a half of battle, and just when other battalions are coming to range themselves under the same banner?

The first circumstance is this.

Not long ago a well-known evangelist, a clergyman, if I mistake not, conducted a series of religions services in a northern town. They did much good, and many professed themselves

converts. At last the evangelist was compelled to depart. Now what could the newly-awakened do? Their Church provided no ordinance exactly suited to their needs. They required something beside liturgical prayers, however beautiful; and so they established Class-meetings, and went up and down the town searching amongst the Methodists for leaders.

That the desire for Christian fellowship is felt in Churches which make no stated provision for its satisfaction, is also evidenced by the existence amongst the Presbyterians of what are called "fellowship meetings." These are held in many Churches on the Sabbath morning. They are intended to bring together the younger members of the Church in an association for spiritual help. In Edinburgh alone, forty-six Churches, including all the Presbyterian denominations, have these meetings, and are joined in a union. The following rules sufficiently indicate their character. What are they but a kind of Class-meeting?

"I. That the Association be called 'THE CHURCH SABBATH MORNING FELLOWSHIP ASSOCIATION.'

"II. That the object of the Association be,—The diffusing of a spirit of prayer among the Young

Men of the Congregation ;* the improving of their Scriptural knowledge ; the promoting of their personal piety ; and the preparing and encouraging of them to enter upon works of Christian usefulness.

"III. That those joining the Association are understood to hold the Holy Scriptures to be the only rule of faith and practice, and to recognise the Shorter Catechism as a sound exposition of doctrinal truth.†

"IV. That this Association meet every Sabbath Morning, at [a quarter to ten o'clock].

"V. That the Exercise of the Meeting be as follows:—The meeting will be opened with praise and prayer, and thereafter the prescribed portion of Scripture will be read, on which each will have an opportunity of making a few explanatory or practical remarks,—no controversy being allowed,—and the meeting will be closed with praise [reading a portion of Scripture], and prayer. The Exercises to be conducted by those previously appointed to do so. As a rule, the Exercises will be conducted by the members in rotation, but no one will be required to take part in the Exercises, unless willing to do so.‡

* If not a Young Men's Association, substitute "Members," or other phrase expressive of the character of the Association.

† Some Associations have no "test" of Membership.

‡ The Exercises in some Associations are entirely devotional.

"VI. That on [the first Sabbath of each month] *or on* [Communion Sabbaths] the Exercises of the meeting be wholly devotional.

"VII. That the members give constant and punctual attendance at the meetings; and should any member be absent two Sabbath mornings successively, he shall be waited on by a member of Committee.

"VIII. That the President, or, in his absence, the Vice-President, shall preside at all meetings of the Association, whether devotional or secular. The Secretary shall take regular minutes of the Association's proceedings, keep a roll of the members, and mark attendance each Sabbath morning, and report absentees to the Visiting Committee."

CHAPTER III.

IS THE CLASS-MEETING A FAILURE?

"The world is too much with us, late and soon."

For the last two years the Wesleyan Methodist Church has had to report a decrease in the number of its enrolled members. After a century and a half of growing prosperity, the Class-meeting seems to be giving signs of failure. While Methodism increases in every other department, she lessens in that of members of society. With a decrease recorded last year of 1,381, it is evident that the question must at any rate be faced; for this is the second year that such a return has had to be made.

Now, before we can assign a just reason for this condition, we must survey the whole field of Methodism. Are we losing on that, or is the loss experienced in one portion? We find the latter to be the case. In Ireland last year there was a small increase, and on our mission-stations a large addition of members; the balance on the whole

being 568 in our favour. The decrease, then, is in the English societies. We must look at home for the evil. Now does this statement of figures actually imply that no conversions occurred in English Wesleyan Methodism between May of 1871 and May of 1872, or, at most, so few that they were far from sufficient to balance the natural losses from deaths, emigrations, &c.

Some may adopt this view, and will, therefore, direct their attention solely to the increase of those methods usually employed to effect conversions; they will multiply out-door sermons, revival services, prayer-meetings, and fellowship meetings.

But is this correct? Do we not, as a matter of fact, gather in a much larger number of converts than these statistics would imply? Must we not search for some abnormal leak whereby the wealth we store flows out as fast as it is poured in?

There is, in Philip Quarles' quaint book of emblems, one device that strikingly illustrates what seems to be the present condition of Methodism. It is a representation of the earth, with two full breasts, from which two figures are drawing milk. One, greedy and bloated, seems as though in a moment he must burst, he has so gorged himself

the other, a withered emaciated wretch, drains as freely as does the first, but milks into a sieve, from which the stream pours off as fast as it enters. Each figure, by the way, wears a fool's cap, and Quarles thus addresses the latter :—

" Oh, thou whose thriveless hands are ever straining
Earth's fluent brests into an empty sieve,
That alwaies hast, yet alwaies art complaining,
And whin'st for more than earth has power to give,
Whose treasure flowes, and flees away as fast,
That ever hast, and hast, yet hast not what thou hast ! "

May it not be said of Methodism just now that she " ever has and has, yet has not what she has ? " Is not this leakage one very considerable cause of the present unsatisfactory state of things ? Are we not pouring into a vessel which leaks, and leaves us very slight gainers, in spite of all our labour ?

It is no uncommon circumstance for a minister or district visitor to find in one street several persons who have been members of the Methodist society, but have lapsed therefrom. There is no great town which does not contain a large number of these lost members, and I firmly believe that this is one of the principal causes of the decrease

in our English societies. That we do add large numbers annually is implied in the fact that we lose so many, else our losses at home would outweigh our gains abroad, and there would be a heavy balance of deficit. That we add as many as we ought, or as we might, of course no one will assert. I, for one, am sure that we are criminally neglecting one source of gain, and are already paying the penalty of neglect. I refer to the children of Methodism. But more of this presently.

There are, it seems to me, three main causes for the apparent failure of the Class-meeting.

I. The heavy drain upon our societies, arising from the methods of modern life, and the indifference of many nominal Methodists.

II. The tone of mind of many of our more educated people in regard to the class

III. Our own grievous error in neglecting the enrolment of our young people.

The first of these causes divides into three branches. We lose heavily by the removals of our members, by their want of real spirituality, and by the multiplication of evening gatherings and diversions, which distract the minds of dwellers in towns, especially of the young.

Removals are a source of continual and extensive loss. The way in which people of the operative and artisan class move from town to town is eminently a feature of modern society. All commercial classes are nomad tribes compared with their forefathers, and these are the classes from which Methodism is chiefly recruited. The Metropolis and the large manufacturing towns are enormous devourers of Methodists; they swallow hundreds yearly, and make no sign.

In these days, when "Religion walks in her silver slippers," every Church has numbers of semi-attached members, who, in a removal, are apt to get altogether detached. They either never apply for a removal ticket, or never present it when obtained, and so are absorbed in the whirlpool of the great town, and lost, until some home-missionary discovers them. Only a few of these cases are reclaimed to the Church. By the time they are discovered, the feeble gleam of spiritual life they once had is quite extinct.

Not a soul need thus be stranded on the desert shore of a strange city. The provision in our system of notes of removal would, if used, be amply sufficient. And by earnest Methodists they

are used. The best blood remains in the body, however widely it may circulate.

But when a Church becomes prosperous it is sure to accumulate lukewarm hangers-on, who, like certain sea-creatures I have heard of, impede the progress of the vessel they attach themselves to. Moved by a temporary wave of religious feeling, they are persuaded by friends or minister to meet in class, and are kept in it by the watchful care of earnest associates; but they are almost glad of the excuse to leave which is afforded by a removal to another place, and feel it a relief to have no one coaxing them into spiritual exercises which they find wearisome. There are others whose piety is not quite so limp as this, but who suffer a foolish shyness, or the business of life, to hinder them from making themselves known in their new circuits.

Perhaps, if all leaders were faithful to their duties, some losses might be prevented; but frequently persons remove from one circuit to another without giving any notice either to leader or minister.

The lack of spiritual earnestness, which is painfully evident in many cases, produces effects also

in other ways besides the one just referred to. It leads to that extraordinary facility for "taking offence" which seems to be the normal condition of many persons. Whole societies are sometimes found distinguished by this unbrotherly spirit, and the conduct of the members reminds one of the action of the two figures in those little cottage devices for showing the state of the weather. When the fine-weather man pops in, the foul-weather man pops out: they are, of course, so constructed as never to remain inside together. Some Churches, unhappily, remind one too forcibly of some old-fashioned barometers: their glass always indicates "Stormy" or "Changeable." Could it be done, it would be instructive to ascertain how many Methodists there are who have been "out of society" at some periods of their lives, and for such a cause as this.

The increasing number of evening gatherings and diversions has much to do, very much, with the apparent failure of the Class-meeting. Setting aside those entertainments or means of improvement which have no avowed religious element, we have a great many affairs more or less connected with our Church system which greatly divert the time

and attention, especially of young persons, and of others, upon whom their management falls. Tea-meetings, soirées, lectures, temperance meetings, Good Templar lodges, bands of hope, sewing meetings, and the like, are sad hindrances to a regular attendance on the weeknight service and the Class-meeting. The former, in many of our large towns, is abandoned to a few of the more simple folk, who still maintain the habits of those former days, when the services at the chapel were the main recreation of serious persons. There are symptoms of an inclination to treat the Class-meeting in the same way. Shall it be so?

In the early days of Methodism the tone of general society made its amusements utterly abhorrent to every serious person. For long, too, the various branches of political and social enterprise were not half so energetic as they are now; nor did Methodists hold the position in civic life that they occupy to-day. Business, also, presses more heavily than it did in those slower times. Thus, duty calling on one side, and recreation on the other, frequently divert attention altogether from the Class-meeting. Many people would say that they have no time to meet in class, many others attend but seldom.

Our age is in danger of mingling religion and recreation too much. We need to remember that spiritual truths are infinitely dignified, and should be held too noble to be insinuated under cover of professed amusement, as we get a powder down a child's throat by covering it with jam. To make religion attractive is one thing; to bedizen her with tinsel and paint is quite another. Choice raiment and goodly stones are but her right; meaner trappings are offensive to those who truly love her. Our services should be bright and seemly, our assemblies gladsome, but we must not forget the sublimity of the high matters with which we deal.

It may be argued that one of our strongest pleas for the Class-meeting, viz., the cementing influence of it, is set aside by the fact that we now have so many other means of bringing together the members of a Church. But what has just been said will show, I think, that none of these things can be a sufficient substitute for the class. Their tendency is not to elevate the grovelling and quicken the inert, but rather to encourage a comfortable feeling of goodnatured, neighbourly, unaspiring easiness, which may be pleasant enough, but is far from the lofty ideal which should be set

before the people. In all the afore-mentioned gatherings, you are dealing with an *audience*; what you want is to appeal to each person *individually*. The temptations to fritter away time multiply rapidly now-a-days. We need more quiet communion with God, diligent study, as distinguished from mere reading of His Word, and fervent and frequent pleading with Him. And our people, as a whole, require to be often and closely reminded of these duties, and stimulated to increased love of them. Now the Class-meeting can well perform this function, and it should be the constant anxiety and effort of a leader to use it for that purpose. We must not forget that a Class-meeting is, or should be, a mixed, though small gathering, and that it ought to include some who can assist the leader in quickening and instructing the others; and this by personal contact. No tea-meetings or soirées whatsoever will answer this end.

The love of money is not without its share in this business. People will not give money in a fair, straightforward way to deserving objects. All sorts of "dodges" are then instituted to extract what is not readily given. All bazaars, big and

little; nearly all tea-meetings and most entertainments, must be included in this category. And in order to make them successful, a number of persons must sacrifice time and strength to a serious degree, and perhaps neglect other employments that have great claims upon them. Consider how much of this occurs in connection with a bazaar! And the same mischief is constantly at work under the guise of "trays" for tea-meetings, tickets for lectures and soirées, and the like. Great waste of capital, in the shape of time and labour, is thus involved, and demands upon leisure, and even upon business, are made, which cause a growing neglect of more profitable exercises.

Time, though elastic, is not illimitable. All good work in this world is done by giving the chief of thought energy to one pursuit, and attending to others only as side branches. The resolution to pass by all pleasant distractions is possessed in its vigour only by a few; but we must all have some measure of it, if we are to do any good in the world.

These are truisms; yet it is well, perhaps, to state them.

Once more let it be repeated that it is the Class-

meeting which has given us our hold upon the people. The work of the Wesleys could never have spread so far and rapidly, if they had simply aroused sinners to repentance, and then left them to themselves. The Class-meeting has been the girdle that has kept together the various folds of the Church, and supported it by a constant and kindly clasp.

It has been said satirically, that Methodism means a penny a-week and a shilling a-quarter. And using the words in a broad sense, it does mean that. It means the combination of the various elements of a religious society in one harmonious whole. The small contributions of the poor, and the large gifts of the wealthy, thrown into one common stock. Rich and poor meeting together, and supplying each other's lack. It means united intercourse and united effort. Would that were a truer thing which is sometimes said of us!—"The Methodists are all at it, and always at it." It is our ideal certainly, and should be our character. And it is well to have a lofty ideal. It is better to aim at a lark and shoot a crow, than to seek only worms, and to spend life in grovelling after them. A man of low aims is

certain to be a man of mean achievement, while he who places his ideal high, elevates his spirit and his actions in that very deed. "Do noble things, although thou dost not promise them," says one, which is certainly better than not doing at all,—than entertaining noble aspirations, and indolently suffering them to pass unrealised. But best of all is it, because most Divine, to fix the gaze upon a grand and pure ideal, and to follow after it continually. When we have once ascertained what Christianity means,—if civilisation, or any other "ation," means differently,—what is our simple course? We must hold to proven truth, at any sacrifice of ease or convenience.

Therefore we must hold fast to whatever commends itself as useful and beneficent in the system that has come down to us, endorsed with the acceptances of our fathers. It may be that it requires us often to deny ourselves, to examine carefully into the forms of social life, and to cast many aside as hollow and useless. Doubtless, it demands from us bravery of heart and stoutness of principle, but it demanded these things from our fathers. To them the times were often very evil, and their courage needed to be great. How would

it have been with us had they failed? Let us never forget that we are the sons and daughters of Reformers, Puritans, and first Methodists; of men who knew what stoning and burning were; who learnt the horrors of dungeons and racks; and who held to the truth through all, and so made the England that we enjoy to-day. Are we worthy children of such sires?

Men live for ease to-day; "in the brave days of old" they lived for conscience.

CHAPTER IV.

FAULTS OF THE CLASS-MEETING; WITH HINTS FOR THEIR CURE.

"Whatsoever things are lovely and of good report—think on these things."

THE faults of the Class-meeting! It is a theme on which many wax eloquent. Did they but speak *in* the class half as fluently as they speak *of* it, the present volume need not have been written, for no one would ever have dreamt of inscribing Ichabod upon the institution. The faults of the Class-meeting? They are legion, if you believe what is said in some quarters. It is a compound of faults, we are told; but although "'tis said, best men are moulded out of faults," the calumniators of our system will not admit that such a fine result is achieved here. Let us listen to one of them; it will be strange if we cannot learn something. The features will be distorted, no doubt, but we can, at any rate, learn what we look like when we make grimaces; and that may teach us to cultivate smiles.

"The difficulty is to know what to mention first," says our objector. "I should say that monotony is a chief point of objection. Class-meetings are formal and poky, and so far from being the stimulating exercises you have tried to make out, they are usually feeble, commonplace, dead-alive affairs. The leaders are often illiterate men, quite unfurnished for the work to which they are set, and incapable of attracting or benefiting educated persons.

"Then your much-vaunted system is, in effect, nothing better than Popery. The classes are horrid little confessionals, in which one confesses to a dozen persons of all sorts, none of whom are sworn to secrecy, instead of to one minister of religion, who is pledged to inviolable silence.

"Moreover, classes are best liked by the persons to whom they are most harmful. They foster the morbid feeling of all—and they are a numerous class—who delight to dwell upon their own frames and feelings, and are always deep in spiritual anatomy. 'Feelings are like chemicals; the more you analyse them the worse they smell,' says Charles Kingsley, and the Methodist system of Class-meetings is nothing else than a mighty labo-

ratory for the prosecution of this analysing. The result, as newspapers say, may be better imagined than described.

"Then for young persons they are especially objectionable, leading to all manner of social embarrassments and undesirable acquaintances. And those whose temperament favours it are encouraged to an impertinent precocity of feeling, and delude themselves with the notion that they are battling with powerful temptations, and suffering the assaults of Satan, when a dose of quinine would send all their spiritual enemies to the rightabout.

"Class-meetings are, infallibly, either whiny and lachrymose, or stiff, cold, and dry. Pleasant alternatives! And to all timid people they are dreadful trials. A young man whose father is a Methodist gentleman of some eminence, met in class for some time, in the village where he lived, but at last discontinued the practice, and so ceased to be a member of society. When asked for a reason, he said that there were several old women in the class he met in, and they always said the same things, and invariably cried at the end, and he really could not endure it any longer. Who can wonder? The Class-meeting is a threadbare idea."

A goodly list of charges! but let us examine them, and see what they amount to. That they contain some truth, I suppose no one will deny; that they need not be half as true as they are I also maintain.

> "When love begins to sicken and decay,
> It useth an enforcèd ceremony."

But there is such a thing as people calling that dry and wearisome to which they have no inclination, or scoffing at that which they do not feel. The rapture of the lover over his darling, of the mother over her babe, are a source of amusement to those who are not feeling the same emotion. The devotion of the artist to his painting, his statue, or his book, appears inexplicable to other men; and while he labours on, spending hours in minute elaborations, and forgetting either to rest or eat, they stand amazed at an ardour they cannot comprehend. This principle is a partial explanation of the objections raised; ignorance of the actual working of the system is another; and, unhappily, some measure of truth must be conceded in the third place.

Class-meetings *are* often monotonous and wearisome. They are apt to keep far too much in one

rut, and so fail of the use they might attain. Many leaders go on from one month to another, through all the years of their existence as leaders, without ever departing from the jog-trot method of "relating their experience," and calling upon the members of the class, in uniform order, to relate theirs. This relation of experience, too, is frequently confined to a very narrow track, that of many being expressed, from one year to another, in some such formula as this:—"I thank the Lord that I am still spared;" or, "I feel thankful that I am still found amongst the people of God, with my face Zionwards;" or, "I feel myself a very unworthy creature, not fit to wash the feet of the servants of my Lord;" or, "My desire is still to be pressing forward: may the Lord perfect that which concerneth me!" Now I am not going to say that these are incorrect expressions to use; but any formula, when repeated unvaryingly from week to week, becomes tedious and meaningless. Nor would I assert that all classes are conducted in this monotonous manner. I know that Methodism can boast of many a flourishing and excellent class, led in a free, kindly, intelligent spirit, and made a means of great spiritual profit to those who

meet in them. I know this from personal experience; and none, therefore, need accuse me of bringing indiscriminate charges against Methodist leaders. Indeed, the faults of the Class-meeting are not due only to the leaders. It is often as much the fault of the members that some classes are such very barren pasture-lands.

Then we must confess that unless the class be well managed, it has its side of danger for a certain type of mind. The morbid, the self-conscious, the emotional, may have their idiosyncrasies fostered, to the neglect and stunting of the simple, tranquil, and wholesome faculties. We may admit, also, that timid persons are sometimes—not always, by any means—put to quite unnecessary pain, and that young persons are brought injuriously forward.

But all this may be admitted without in the least degree impairing the force of the argument I have endeavoured to set forth. Like all other human institutions, this one of the Class-meeting has its inefficient administrators. But this fact is just as true of a hundred other things, which we do not therefore abandon. Rather, we endeavour to develop their virtues and repress their

vices; to remedy their faults, and make their points of advantage more widely useful. And this is what we must do with the Class-meeting, if we wish it to flourish in the future. It is worthy of support as it is; it might easily be made an organisation of more exceeding value.

Thus, when it is asserted that the Class-meeting is a failure, as regards its principle, we deny the assertion *in toto*. When it is added that Class-meetings are abandoned to routine, are feeble and monotonous, we maintain that these terms are too harsh to apply indiscriminately to the whole system, that there are many meetings which cannot come into such a category at all. But we admit that in a lesser degree the terms do apply, and that, without doubt, this institution of ours needs a little brushing and sorting. To the further objection that Class-meetings are injurious to morbid and self-conscious people, we reply that they need not be so, although, speaking candidly, that is their weak point. If they were conducted in the manner I am about to indicate, this objection would lose all its force.

The case of the young people is discussed in a separate chapter.

And now for a few suggestions relative to the improvement of the Class-meeting. If to some of you, my readers, the following hints appear revolutionary, do not let yourselves be startled into condemnation before you have carefully thought out the matter and considered whither my suggestions tend. Remember what was advanced in the former chapters on the difference between our social condition and that of our fathers. Principles do not change, but their setting often must. With all that respect for the large mass of Methodist leaders which they thoroughly deserve, I must express the opinion, shared by many persons, that the time is come when we need to make some changes in the working of the Class-meeting. An obstinate refusal to do this will effect the very catastrophe it wishes to avert. Let us be wise in time.

Now, if we turn to Mr. Wesley's journals, what encouragement do we find for introducing changes as they may seem desirable ?

We find him expressing a great fear of formality, and an almost eager willingness to adopt anything that seemed an improvement. Very early in the history of the Society he commenced the practice

of reading, once a month, accounts of spiritual work carried on by all the Churches, in various parts of the world as well as in England; and the meeting at which this was done was frequently, he says, "a time of strong consolation to all who loved God."

Wesley was distinguished all through life by a readiness to seize any indications that led to improvement. His wonderful success was very largely due, under the providence of God, to his ability for profiting by what seemed the hints of chance circumstance. He clung to no plan, even of his own devising, if he saw good reason for it; nor ever stood by details that proved themselves ineffective. That he never intended the Classes solely for the relation of experience, is a fact perfectly evident to all careful readers of his journals and other works. And this fact underlies all the previous discussion. In speaking of the Class-meeting, I have intended not every gathering of that name, but the Class-meeting as it might be, as John Wesley would have it be. Were he with us to-day, he would launch many a trenchant rebuke against the monotony of the average modern Class-meeting, and its neglect of any accommodation to the changes in society.

For example. The early Class-meetings consisted very largely of persons just snatched from a condition of gross darkness and depravity. Considering the enormous spread of elementary knowledge and decency, one may safely say that not a fourth of our members now are in the state that three-fourths were then. There can be no excuse now for those close and pointed inquiries which were adopted in the beginning.

We have numbers of persons in our societies now, whose experience is tolerably uniform, varying little from week to week, for the most part. If they made a statement of it once a month it would be quite often enough. And, as a matter of fact, they probably do not speak oftener than this, because they only attend in about that degree. But this is a very unsatisfactory state of things. The Class-meeting will fall into utter disrepute before long, if it be suffered to drag on a half-hearted life of this sort. What is needed is to obtain a condition of things that shall ensure a more regular attendance, and increase the interest and profit of the meetings.

Mr. Wesley's desire to maintain interest led him once to a suggestion that leaders should often meet

one another's classes: a proposal that would hardly find favour, I suspect, now, whatever success it had then. Classes often object to meet together, even for the renewal of tickets by the minister, though it is in some instances necessary.

I feel certain, for my own part, that if Mr. Wesley could return to us now, his first dealings would be with the Class-meeting and the children. I think, too, that he would probably set his face like a flint against all bazaars, and most tea-meetings and soirées; but that is no part of our present topic. His clear perceptions and sound judgment would devise many alterations for the improvement of our Church fellowship. But even the system he devised a hundred and fifty years ago would be, if intelligently worked, not so bad after all. We neglect, for the most part, one of its most important features, and then cry out that it is a failure. How many English leaders make a practice of reading to their classes, once a month, some edifying account of Christian Work?

It may be objected that the increase of reading and of publications makes people familiar with all that might be brought before them in the classes; but is this a valid objection? Do the mass of our

people read the Methodist publications, especially the Missionary Notices, regularly? How many procure and read the report of the Ladies' Society, of the Mission to the Jews, or of the Zenana Mission? There are papers and books which from time to time inform the public of those brave and modest efforts made in the depth of London slums; but how many Methodists read them? How many know anything of the Misses Hill's labours amongst London poor, of Mrs. Meredith's work in the Prison-gate Mission, and of many a holy enterprise beside? A general idea may be spread abroad, thanks to newspapers and magazines, which people *do* read, but a knowledge of details is possessed only by the few.

Brief, stirring memoirs should also be read to the classes. Such articles as those which have appeared in *Good Words* on Agnes Elizabeth Jones, William Allen, and others, and in our own shilling magazine on Dr. Henderson, the medical missionary to China; papers on Christian morals and on Scriptural or devotional subjects: these might very profitably form part of the class meeting exercises. Brief, animated, and often giving the epitome of a volume, they would be of immense

service in rousing noble sympathies, and lifting from the often-sordid grooves of every-day life to a region of brave and beneficent examples.

The objection that these readings would only bring before people that which they knew before, cannot have much weight allowed to it. Multitudes never cut any pages of a magazine but those that contain the stories; and much of the information indicated is to be gathered from publications that the masses of the people never meet with, and that even many educated people know little of. And if it did occasionally happen that some members of a class had previously read what the leader brought before them, surely they would feel it no great disadvantage to hear a second time that which is profitable and interesting. Our treacherous memories are only too apt to let slip inspiring recollections, and we need very often to call back the thought of those who battled bravely in their day, and have entered into rest; or of those who are still amongst us, bearing the bright flame of holy zeal into the dark places of the world, and showing us that Christianity has lost none of its power, as we are at times too apt to fancy.

Short passages of a devotional or expository kind might be read almost every week, being made longer on some occasions. This practice brings the various minds into accord, and suggests profitable reflections. Of course, the reading of the Scriptures themselves should form part of every leader's programme, to be taken in turn with other things.

The foregoing considerations seem to shape themselves into such a plan as follows. If anyone can suggest improvements therein, the writer will only rejoice to have elicited thought on the subject.

Suggestions for conducting classes :—

First Week:—Experience, related in order, with the exception of persons whose timidity is such as justifiably to excuse them. A brief devotional passage might preface the speaking.

Second Week:—Readings of the kind described above, and so selected as to increase Christian zeal and sympathy. A prayer, or prayers, referring to any branch of work thus brought forward, might follow.

Third Week:—Reading and exposition of the Scriptures. If desired, relation of experience might have some place this week.

Fourth Week:—A prayer-meeting, the subject of which should sometimes be agreed upon, and be such as does not occupy the prominent place in public worship, as, for instance, the conversion of friends and relatives, and of the children of Christian people, and so forth.

In order effectively to carry out any plan of this kind, it will be necessary to observe a few conditions.

I. Every leader must be careful to seek out appropriate devotional and expository literature, to furnish himself with suitable readings, and to make himself acquainted with the various pious undertakings of the day, that he may be truly a leader, and may guide the souls committed to his charge into fields they knew not of.

II. John Wesley's plan of instructing the leaders themselves should be revived. In what are called the Large Minutes there is a regulation that every leader shall be diligently examined at each quarterly visitation as to his method of meeting a class. It is also ordained that the leaders converse often and freely with the minister—the Assistant, as then he was called.

This, like many other things, must be adopted in

the spirit rather than in the letter. The time of the preachers is now so much occupied, there are so many demands upon it, that for them to undertake the training of leaders would be well-nigh impossible.

But if the leaders met together, say twice a quarter, they could surely do something towards training themselves! Those who have little time for reading, a scanty education, or insufficient access to means of information, might have their defect supplied by those who are better circumstanced. And in most societies there might be found one person, in the unavoidable absence of the minister, capable of directing to sources of supply, and guiding selection. No harm would be done if all the classes in a society heard the same facts, or prayed for the same objects, in any week. But this need not be; there is range enough.

III. Is it too much to say that the *weekly* Class-meeting *is* a failure, or rather, is becoming, in all towns, a great difficulty? Would it not be well to make some change in this respect? The week-night service and the Class-meeting might be held in alternate weeks; or, better still, perhaps, the prayer-meetings and class-meetings might thus al-

ternate. But the former seems preferable. That we have, as Methodists, too many *weekly* assemblies is an evident fact, and the result is that they are all more or less neglected; or else press heavily upon those who feel bound to attend them.

These various suggestions are put forward only as attempts to realise what is so desirable and necessary—a more efficient working of the Class-meeting. To many they will, no doubt, be in some shape or other familiar; for I rejoice to think that, after all, there are no inconsiderable number of good leaders in Methodism. But perhaps there may be something new in what I have written, or at any rate something new to the majority. Will they read it candidly, with an earnest wish to know the truth and to follow it?

In Methodism, no less than in England generally, there has been too much of the disposition to take prosperity for granted. England had the trade of the world so long that she looked for it in perpetuity, and Methodism did for a long period take such amazing strides that she began to think shorter steps were impossible to her. A fatal habit of mind! Anything that has roused us from it may be looked upon as a great blessing. We may well

accept our present position as a kind reproof, intended to bring us to an humbler temper, and to teach us to follow in the wake of our praying wrestling forefathers.

> "They climbed the steep ascent of heaven
> Through peril, toil, and pain,
> Oh God, to us let grace be given,
> To follow in their train!"

No one who notes the masses of human beings herded in manufacturing districts, and in our terrible metropolis, can think that the mission of Methodism is over. A great work lies before her yet; and so long as she deals principally with the working classes, and with those immediately above them, so long the Class-meeting, wisely managed and adapted to the times, must prove a powerful auxiliary, if not a necessity. We see in it a machinery capable of indefinite variety of adaptation—a web that may be used for all manner of garments and be as useful to the peer as to the peasant. Simple in its plan, and extremely flexible in its constitution, it only needs to be set free from those conventionalities that encumber it, to become a mighty force for good.

One point occurs just here, and should be

touched upon, though it is hardly in its right place. The Class-meeting as a test of membership is objected to by many persons, and by those often, who come to us from other churches. They say, "Why do not you accept communicants as members?"

That we ought to enrol our communicants is a point on which it is scarcely necessary to insist. The day is coming when it will be done. But that will not render them eligible for the offices which can only be held by those who meet in class.

Many of those who thus come to us from other Churches, and desire to be accounted members because they are communicants, are thoughtful, intelligent, refined people, and we would gladly have them amongst us as members. But after all they are a small class, and however much we desire their services, we cannot upset all our Church organisation on their account. Will they not see this, and determine to take the only right course open to them?

Amongst those who stand aloof from the Class-meeting are many who are well fitted by education and ability to be leaders. The Church needs them in this capacity. Shrewd and earnest as numbers

of our leaders are, they are frequently persons who are appointed for lack of others more suitable. Not a few of them achieve wonders out of their scanty resources, and ofttimes a plain working man makes a racy practical leader of a class, and shows himself able to sympathise with many differing characters. But at the same time it is often felt that too much is thrown on to persons of this class. The work of leading classes is left in many places far too much to those whose early education has been slight, and whose stores of information are small. We need greater variety in our leaders. Many object to the Class-meeting who ought to be giving their energies to its management and improvement. To all these we may well address the Master's words, "Why stand ye here all the day idle?"

In the foregoing chapter sufficient attention has not been given to the objection raised by nervous and timid people against speaking in the class. Too many leaders endeavour to enforce this point, greatly to the distress of those concerned. It should be distinctly understood that none are to be forced into speaking; that the relation of experience should be quite optional; and that those

who wish to be "silent members" have a perfect right to be so. The attempt to force persons of retiring or timid disposition into speech gives a weapon into the hands of those who oppose Class-meetings.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

"Of such are the kingdom of heaven."

A METHODIST lady, mother of several children now growing up, was heard one day by the present writer to make the following remark: "The ignorance of the Bible and of Christian truth that I find in many young persons now-a-days is shocking to me. I don't know how it is in other churches; perhaps no better than amongst ourselves; but, at any rate, the young people of Methodism do not read their Bibles a quarter so much as they ought to do, and doctrines they won't trouble themselves with at all. If this goes on unchecked the next generation will know no more of our Scriptures, from their own reading, than they do of the Koran, and they will be an easy prey to all manner of doubts, scepticisms, and heresies."

She added that fortunately many of the young women in that society attended a Class conducted

by a lady who bears an honoured name, and whose individual knowledge and excellencies well qualify her for her work.

Of course the instruction of children in the Scriptures must be the work, in early life, at any rate, of parents and teachers; but the Church has her responsibilities in regard to the children of her people. As they grow up she is bound to take them by the hand, to ascertain that they receive some instruction in Christian doctrine, and to place them, as far as possible, in initiatory classes, from which, as they grow older, they can pass into the advanced classes, and be ready to take the room of their fathers. What is Methodism doing to effect this? So little, that it may almost be called nothing.

There is one name that always comes to one's mind when this subject is discussed. The Rev. Samuel Jackson spent his life in trying to lead the Methodist people to action on a matter the most important that could occupy them. He saw the thousands of young persons in our sanctuaries, and his heart yearned over them. He did all that man could do,—wrote, spoke, prayed, and laboured, and with his dying breath commended

the cause to those he left on earth. His efforts yet remain uncrowned with success; Methodism still neglects her children. How long shall this be true? How long will the Church let her sons and daughters pass by uncared for, while all the tempters of the world will care only too well for them? It is monstrous that the present condition of things should last a month. The temperance movement has laid hold upon the children and the youths, and is making rapid progress in its efforts to enlist them. But admirable and beneficial as this may be, it will not stand instead of Christian counsel and instruction. It is of no use for us to lift a yearly wail over the disinclination of our young people to join the Church of their fathers, while we take no steps to achieve a better state of things, but leave all efforts to individual members scattered in a few towns. So long as Methodism thus culpably neglects one of the first duties of a Church she must expect to reap the consequences. It is high time that we woke up to a sense of the immense importance of this matter. The Episcopal Church has great charms for young minds. Its ancient edifices, its grand liturgy, its musical effects, and the distinction

supposed to attach to it, imaginary as the latter is · all these are so many attractions, which frequently draw away our young people, and deprive us of our natural heritage. In the character of our ministry, and the opportunities we offer for the employ of every talent, we have advantages quite sufficient, I think, to outweigh Episcopacy in the esteem of the majority, if we bestir ourselves in time. But we must exert ourselves, by judicious and affectionate oversight, to attach young persons to the Church of their fathers in early life.

The Church of Rome has always seen the importance of securing the rising generation; and in this lies one secret of her power. John Wesley, too, sagacious far beyond many of his followers, concerned himself most anxiously for the children. Had we, during the last hundred, or even fifty years, been doing as he would have done, we should have found ourselves in a very different position to-day.

"What shall we do," he says, in the minutes before referred to, "for the rising generation? Unless we do this, the present revival will be *res unius ætatis;* it will last only the age of a man."

"Where there are ten children in a society, meet them at least an hour every week."

"But you forget," says an objector, "that there were no Sunday-schools then."

No, I do not forget it at all; but I do marvel that, as a Church, we turn our Sunday-school organisation to so little account.

Besides, many young people, and that more especially when they reach the most critical age, are left untouched by Sunday-schools. The children of the better educated do not go to Sunday-schools. Those who do are in the habit of leaving, in most parts of the country, as they pass from childhood to youth.

And were it not so, the attendance at the Sunday-school does not imply membership in the Church, nor does it, by natural sequence, lead to that. Has it not long been a matter of painful concern to us that our vast Sunday-school machinery effects so little apparent result in the way of increase to the Church? No doubt more reasons than one contribute to this result; but we must, I think, confess that our negligence has not a little to do with it. We have fondly thought—although not without warnings to the contrary—

that our children would never be enticed away from us, and that, without effort, we should retain them amongst us. Surely this is a mistake!

Would that Methodists could be aroused to a clear sense of the importance of this subject! It is a matter in which every year is of immense importance. Though we dally, time does not. Successive generations have come into being, grown up, and passed away: and still, with all our self-laudation of our splendid institutions, we have, this many a year, been letting slip the heritage which should have been carefully stored. Our Sunday-schools and class-meetings have not done for us what they might because we have been careless and presumptuous in our use of them. It seems as though we considered that in the ordinary Class-meeting we had an agency quite sufficient for all our purposes, and needing no adaptation to make it fit for our young people. Our young people have differed from that view, or no-view; and as we made no proper provision for them, many have remained outside altogether.

And not blameably so, I say. The ordinary Class-meeting is not a fit place for young people from fifteen to twenty-one; it encourages an un-

healthy precocity of feeling, and fosters morbid vanity. We do not feed infants, if we are wise, on spiced meats and strong drinks. Therefore, if we have provided for our children no other means of connection with the Church than is afforded by the mixed class for the relation of experience, I, for one, say it is better they should leave that alone. These words may seem overbold, perhaps; but I speak not without book.

But how much longer shall we go on in this old rut? Do we intend still to raise our yearly laments over the numbers of young persons standing in our outer courts, yet be content with lamenting, and with wondering how it is that things are as they are? Why does not Methodism arise and confess that much as she may have done she has not done enough, and that henceforward her care shall be to supply that which is lacking, and to wipe out for ever the reproach that she does not care suitably or sufficiently for her children?

It never does to worry young folks into religion; but the opposite extreme of negligence is even more reprehensible. Not because it is more unwise, but because it shows a very defective state of mind.

Not long ago a Methodist lady visited a large town in the north of England, a place where Methodism flourished. The friends with whom she stayed attended a good chapel, well filled, and the visitor was much struck with the number of young persons, ranging from fourteen to one or two-and-twenty, that she observed in the congregation. She inquired afterwards how many of them were members of society.

"Not many," was the reply. "You see there is nothing for them but the ordinary Class-meeting, and they don't like that. I can't say, myself, that I think it is the proper place for them."

"Perhaps some of them are in select classes in a Sunday-school?"

"Yes, some of the younger ones may be; and many of the older ones teach in our Sunday-school; but in neither case are they members of the Church. A few, I believe, meet in class, and some others communicate regularly. But you see we have no hold upon them; no regular system of training for those whom Sunday-schools do not touch, or for utilising the work of Sunday-schools, and making it, what it should be, a porch to the Church."

"And are all you fathers and mothers quietly accepting this state of things?" said the visitor. "Can you be content with it? How is it you do not learn a lesson from the Romanist party, both the one inside and the one outside the Church of England? They spare no pains to teach and secure the young."

Bands of Hope are very well in their way, but they will not do all that is needed; neither will Good Templar lodges, or Mutual Improvement Associations. We must do something more than this. Every baptized child is, in a sense, committed to the guardianship of the Church, and it is the duty of the Church to remind its parents from time to time of their duty towards it, and to provide, at the proper time, means for its union with the members of the Church. We cannot escape the onus of this duty. If we fail to fulfil it, we must bear the penalty. If we do our best, we shall reap the reward.

It is perfectly true that parents are individually responsible for the training they give their children in physical, mental, moral, and spiritual matters. The main responsibility, without question, lies on them. But then the Church is very largely made

up either of parents or of persons standing in *loco parentium*. She is therefore bound every way to care for the young, to gather them together in early life, to bind them to herself before the influences of the world rush in upon them, to foster the simple earnest faith of childhood, and, in youth, while it is yet fresh, to graft upon it a good stock of sound knowledge. Thus, and thus only, may she hope that in after days her children will arise to call her blessed, and that the specious sophisms of doubt will fall harmless upon a faith so deeply rooted: a faith which they may for a time shake but can never overthrow.

One of the elements in human nature to which the Class-meeting appeals is emulation. By binding together persons in pursuit of one object zeal is increased, indolence checked, and mutual defects supplied. An *esprit du corps* is generated which is most useful, and the enthusiasm of one communicating itself to another, a stronger energy possesses every spirit, and the determination to make "our" cause succeed becomes the universal and overwhelming motive.

Especially is this the case with young persons. Their sympathies are keen, their sensibility to

friendly influence very strong, and their ambition active. In their studies they are spurred on by emulation. In the formation of neat, industrious, or thrifty habits, or the acquirement of skill in any pursuit, it is still emulation that is the parent's or teacher's best friend. And in religious matters we must depend much upon a moderate use of the same principle. What else does the Apostle mean when he speaks of "provoking one another to love and good works?"

Then the social instinct is strong in early life. Advancing age chills the candour of youth, casts back its generous ardour in its face, and bids it, too often with a bitter scowl never forgotten, to "mind its own business, and keep its tongue between its teeth." To lay hold of the young while these social and candid instincts are yet unblighted, and to make use of them both while keeping them, especially the former, within due bounds, is what we should aim at. A suitable leader may gain an influence over young people that will often last all through life, and prove a means of great blessing.

All that has been said on the improvement of Class-meetings might be borne in mind by those

who have to lead classes of young people—of catechumens, as we may call them. The disposition of youth to reverence nobility of character and achievement might thus be directed into proper channels, and fed with elevating examples. The classes would furnish a means of teaching the great truth youth is so apt to forget, or often fails to learn, that of some of God's greatest heroes and heroines it must be said—

"Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart."

And yet

"The lowliest duties on itself did lay."

The faith thus sown in the receptive mind of childhood and of youth will spring up a mighty tree, rooted firmly in the soil, and spreading its wealthy branches far across the field.

The practical issue of all this should be a vigorous determination, come to by every man who calls himself a Wesleyan Methodist, that he will take no rest himself, nor give any to the societies, until this great duty of caring for the children of our congregations be earnestly realised and actively commenced. By our neglect of this we are losing thousands of adherents.

The plan I would suggest is very simple, and disturbs no existing arrangement. It simply lifts up to a higher level means already in operation. Let the select classes in every Sunday-school be put on the same footing as the society classes, in regard to membership; the young persons composing them being reckoned as members of society, and the teachers as leaders. Thus you bring at once within the clasp of the Church a mighty number of young people; you continue to give them the instruction they need; and as they grow older you can draft them off into more advanced classes. These select classes should gather to them all the juvenile members of the congregation, and if there are too many for two classes—a boys' and a girls'—four might be formed. They should always, where possible, be divided into junior and senior. Catechumen tickets should be given to the juniors, and notes upon trial to the seniors, and the latter should be encouraged to attend at the table of the Lord, and have its meaning clearly laid before them.

To be always insisting upon doctrines would be most unwise; yet in these days it cannot but be advisable to indicate ever and again the founda-

tions of the faith, and the distinctions between truth and error.

It may be urged that the tendency shown by young folks to act for themselves, and to pursue their own ends, may make it difficult to establish or carry out such a system as the one here indicated. That from one cause or another some difficulty may arise is not at all unlikely. No doubt for some time to come we shall have to bear the consequence of our inaction. We must be content to reap in a late harvest the result of a dilatory sowing. But it is possible to create a disposition of the sort needed, even where it may be wanting.

The differences in the Sunday-school operations of different counties illustrate this. In Lancashire, and also in other parts of England, Sunday-schools have attained a power unknown elsewhere. While in this and that place teachers are complaining that as boys and girls get up into their teens they drop away from the school, and can only be retained by being made junior teachers (a fine way of doing evil that good may come) in Lancashire you may see grown men and women, by the score, trooping off to school, and that even

after marriage. It is the custom there. The population has been trained to attend Sunday-schools without any limit as to age. They have always been used to see aunts, uncles, and acquaintances going year after year until increasing family ties broke up the habit, and so the younger generation feels no false shame, and no reluctance, and what we labour for continually without success in many districts we get in Lancashire without effort.

Now if it be possible to create one disposition of this kind it is possible to create another. It may, perhaps, be a work of time, and demand patient effort, since all work done out of season is abnormally difficult, and this is a task which ought long since to have been attempted, this folding of our young people within the Church.

Will every Methodist householder who reads these pages put to himself, and to his friends, the following questions ?—

I. Have you, in your society, ten young persons between twelve and twenty years of age ?

II. Do you divide such as you have into classes, and place them under leaders more or less qualified to instruct them in the doctrines and duties, espe-

cially the duties of religion, and to explain the Bible ?

III. Do you give tickets of initiation to the junior classes, and notes upon trial to the senior ones ?—and do you prepare and expect the latter to present themselves at the Lord's table ?

IV. If you don't do this, do you still think it strange that so many of your young people leave the Church of their fathers, or have but a slight attachment to it ?

V. Do you, as you do in so many other instances, leave this work to the preachers, most of whom are almost over-wrought already, and all of whom are fully occupied with affairs of the most various kinds ?

An indefinite amount of correspondence, on all sorts of subjects, appears continually in the Methodist newspapers, and efforts are put forth, all for the attainment of objects certainly less important than the one now before us. This has a share of attention now and then, to be sure: but what comes of it? Any connexional action ? Is it not still left to the efforts of the scattered few ?

And where it is done at all, it is often done by the ministers. Were the work organised on any-

thing like a proper scale the ministers could not do it all; moreover, it should be in connection with the Sabbath-school system, so as to make that in truth what it is often called, the nursery of the Church.

All details are best left to the peculiarities of localities. Four points only need to be kept in mind:—

I. The preachers are over-weighted already. Only in some circuits could the junior minister be relied on for assistance.

II. The bulk of the work must be done by the laity—as, we are glad to know, much work is done in Methodism.

III. For the advanced classes of young men and women, just arriving at the age of personal responsibility, the services of cultivated and well-informed persons will be required. More Christian women's work will be called for than heretofore.

IV. In this, as in every other department, it must not be forgotten that *for all Christian work the finest tools are the best.* They need not be mounted with gold, but they ought to be of the best steel, delicate, polished, and able to cut straightforward. All that is implied in the word

delicate—a fine, clean stroke—thoroughly good workmanship—no coarseness or harshness.

For the work just now spoken of, and for all God's work, we need the Church's *best*. Shall we not have it?

CHAPTER VI.

CULTIVATED CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIAN CULTIVATORS.

"Give unto me, made lowly-wise
The spirit of self-sacrifice."

HAVING now adverted to the various other questions that branch out of the one with which this essay commences, let us return upon our steps, review our starting point, and bring to a focus the principal ideas that were made out as we proceeded. Then we shall clearly understand whither we are travelling, and what answer we must return to those who ask,—Is the Class-meeting essential? Essential, that is, to the prosperous existence of the Church known as Wesleyan Methodist.

Those who answer this question in the negative do so on a three-fold ground. They say:—

I. It is in its nature tentative, the offspring of a special condition of religious life which is transitory. That which was designed to meet this condition must be itself also transitory. The attempt to bolster it up, and to perpetuate it

in changed social surroundings, is foolish and damaging.

II. That the addition of large numbers of educated and refined persons to the ranks of Methodism makes the Class-meeting objectionable as a condition of membership, because to such persons it is unprofitable and unpleasant.

III. That the prevailing character of Class-meetings adds much force to the objection against them, as it makes them of very little service to anyone, and decidedly harmful to not a few.

By way of answer to the first part of this objection I endeavoured to show the fallacy on which it is based. The condition of religious life that called forth the Class-meeting is not, like the horrible vagaries of the Rosicrucians, a temporary outburst; it is a more or less permanent state, being a manifestation of fundamental human tendencies. Some of the exhibitions that accompanied the rise of Methodism were, unquestionably, of the ephemeral character attributed, by our objectors, to the whole movement. But when they passed it was clearly seen that this great revival had aroused principles which the Protestant Church was in danger of allowing to slumber, and which were

henceforth to rise up in their strength and become the standards of the Church. Not alone of one section of the Church, but of every Christian denomination, although not fully acknowledged yet.

It was argued rapidly, but I hope clearly, that these principles were no new growth, but rather were coeval with Christianity itself, and found a wide, though terribly mistaken expression, in the history of Monasticism. Also, that at the period of the Methodist revival, these principles were in full operation in one Christian community—the Moravian—and that in Methodism they found only a more extended field of usefulness. In connection with this it was remarked that the whole method of their adoption indicated a providential leading. There was no autocratic attempt to impose a ready-made scheme upon the nation. Like Christianity, Methodism grew and expanded; it did not burst full-blown upon the world; and we hold this to be strong evidence that it cannot be so ephemeral as is alleged.

No: ephemeral or transitory it *cannot* be. It supplies a human need as real and as perpetual as the physical appetite for food. However true it may be that often Churches, like individuals, are born in

sore travail and suffering, and that their birth is marked by throes which are soon past, so that the help called in to allay them is also only needed for a time: however true this may be, it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind the fact that a Church is not a fixed organisation, moving onward, in all its atoms, from one stage to another. It is not a coach, all of whose parts are in the same place at the same time.

If it were so, it would still be open to us to maintain that there is no stage of Christian experience attainable in this world that can abrogate the law of Christian fellowship; but that, on the contrary, those who are living most entirely in the spirit of the Gospel will be most desirous of saintly counsel, and of strengthening each other by a comparison of their several deliverances and meditations. The communion of saints, so dear to Apostolic minds, was not the intercourse of those who were infants in the Divine life.

But this representation of the Church is not a true one. When we think of her, we must picture to ourselves a mighty band of pilgrims, all wearing one dress and travelling through one valley to one city at its end. Their aim is single,

their direction common, but their rate of travelling, how different! One goes by a rugged road, up the steep hillside, and often passes by many a frightful precipice; another is directed by the guide to keep a lowland path, amongst the pastures by the river-side; a third is sent through tangled forests and across deep marshes; a fourth by stony glens and over wild, open moors. And not only are their paths so various, but their ages and conditions vary equally, and their speed and nerve in travelling. Many miles intervene between some of the companies, and never can they all see each other. It is evident, that to argue from the requirements of one to the requirements of another must often be impossible. He on the mountain side will need a pole to steady his steps, he in the forest an axe to clear his way, he in the lowland field a telescope to descry the distant prospect, and he on the wild moor a chart to guide his footsteps. Yet all will have some wants in common. Daily provision for hunger and thirst, directions for the general course of the journey, the camping place at night, where the day's toils are recounted and the blazing watchfire is set: these are necessities to all alike. The noonday repast by the brookside, and the even-

ing meal by the camp fire are needed by every pilgrim, whether in the van or the rear, on the high ground or the low.

We affirm, then, and we think we have proved our affirmation, that the Class-meeting (understanding by that term the Class-meeting as it *ought* to be) is no temporary adaptation to a passing need, but is the produce of an innate human necessity. The world wanted it, therefore it existed. Further, the world is substantially the same in its religious needs as it was when Methodism originated; therefore, it needs Methodism still; it needs Christian fellowship still.

Who will deny this? What was it that made Methodism such a Divine boon to the eighteenth century? Was that not a time of apathy, irreligion, profanity, and lawlessness? And much as we have improved, much as Methodism, by the grace of its Divine Author, has done to modify the appropriateness of these terms in describing English life of to-day, must it not still be confessed, with shame and sorrow, that they are not inapplicable? Do not Irreligion, Profanity, and Vice parade unblushingly in our streets, while Squalor and Misery sit at home in the courts and alleys?

Was the eighteenth century a period of scurrility and indecency in literature, of apathy and self-indulgence in all the wealthier grades of society, and of licentious brutality in the lower grades? We own it true, and ask again, Are public decency and religious feeling never outraged in the literature of to-day? Are apathy, and self-indulgence, and brutality, and licentiousness, banished from the land? Are there no vicious novels and poems, no materialistic theories, no libertine schemes, no sneering libels on Christianity and its followers? Are all the Lord's people prophets, full of holy zeal and charity? Are there no easy-going, unconcerned, nominal Christians? Are all the masses of our population permeated by Gospel truths, and living, at least, in outward decency and comfort?

If before these questions we must hang our heads, and sadly acknowledge that to the pure eyes of the Lord God of Sabaoth the England of to-day can only seem a few shades better than the England of Wesley's day, then the argument as to the adaptation of Methodism to the needs of modern society is settled. Were John Wesley to revisit us to-day, his first trumpet-call in the ears of his followers would be to advancement, enlargement,

devotion. He was too large-minded to cling to any form that proved itself a broken cistern. One by one, in the course of his long apostolic career, he cast aside his priestly notions and his clinging regards for the traditions of Episcopacy. Whenever change or enlargement appeared desirable he was prompt to make it, and in such action often went before the opinion of his disciples and helpers. No man was ever less besotted by his own inventions; but, withal, he never let go a principle that had once commended itself to his judgment, nor suffered any relaxation of wise discipline and order. There are many who would fain bring down Divine injunctions to the level of human convenience, and make them mean what it is thought they ought to mean. If they imitated John Wesley, and all other really great men, they would make it their endeavour to lift up humanity to the level of Divine precept.

It is a truism to say that when a principle is once established it must be held fast, whatever it may lead to. If it be well-founded and thoroughly proved, whatever may be brought against it, it must not be disturbed. All new combinations must be brought to it as to a touchstone, and we

must be content to abide the result; being assured of this, that eternal principles cannot fail, and therefore that work only which is founded upon them will endure. Let us beware that we bring no hay, wood, or stubble to the erection of the Temple of the Lord. Have we proved that the principle on which the Class-meeting rests is sound and irrefragable? Then, whatever objections are urged to it *on principle*, are such as we cannot listen to at all, since we have satisfied our judgment to the contrary. It is only with objections to certain points in the working of the scheme that we can concern ourselves. And to these we are very ready to give consideration, seeing that any pure attachment demands the utmost perfection in the object of regard.

There is too much of a disposition abroad, and especially in religious matters, to forget this cardinal principle of holding fast to all well-established truths. There is too great a readiness to attempt the dangerous method of adapting truth to circumstance, rather than the more difficult, but only safe course, of conforming circumstance to truth. We see this disposition at work in many fields; but the seed it sows is rotten, and the

harvest can only be noxious weeds. No profitable crop ever comes of this sowing. If we sow the truth, the harvest may indeed be slow, but it will surely come at last, and the sheaves will not be scanty.

Thus we deal with the first part of the objection to the Class-meeting. What has been said is a perfectly sufficient answer to all that can be urged on the opposing side. If the *principle* be established the argument is at an end.

But forsaking the higher argument for a while, let us come down to the level of the objections made, and see what they are worth. The tastes of educated persons, and the prevailing character of Class-meetings, are the points on which stress is laid.

Now, first, why should an hour's intercourse with fellow Christians, even of a humble grade, be disagreeable to persons of genuine piety? Many uneducated people are fully as shrewd as their betters, and often express themselves with a racy vigour, a clear, practical piety, and a homely sense that would do credit to more cultured circles. Religion still proves itself, as it ever did, a refining, elevating agent, which is often most powerful in

its operation on the most unpromising material. And we have the Saviour's own warrant for asserting that in His kingdom it is the humble receptive faculty, not the polished intellect, which is most valuable. We hear repeated almost to weariness, and yet must repeat again, that the truths which were to the ritual-loving Jews, and to the artistic and philosophic Gentile, mere foolishness and hindrance, were truths by which the world was to be redeemed. There are those who will openly avow that if they *must* choose between the two, they would rather meet in class with the poor than with the rich solely. A good mixture of ranks and degrees of education is the ideal for the Class-meeting to aim at. Exclusion of either one or another is damage. But if it be quite necessary to cast out one element, why then, I should say, looking at the whole bearing of the action, by all means let it be the "cultured" element. We shall need to be very sorry, and very ashamed for Methodism, if it can ever be said of her that she has ceased to preach the Gospel to the poor.

If I believed—which I think I have shown I do not—that the Class-meeting is suitable only to the lower classes of our land, I would say, as em-

phatically as ever: "Still keep it; the mission of Methodism is chiefly to the masses. Let us keep them, whatever else we lose."

But it need not, it must not, come to this. We must pray God to breathe the spirit of earnest and pure godliness into every member of our congregations. We must at all times set clearly before the people the principle on which the Class-meeting rests, and the certainty that it will not be abandoned for the sake of gathering in one class only, however worthy. We long for them; we will do all we can, consistently, to gain them to our ranks; but we may not sacrifice principle.

It is not for their advantage that we should. They may, if they choose, derive great advantages from stated fellowship with other members of the same Church. Book-learning and refined manners are very valuable, but they are not the only possessions to be desired.

The third part of the objection to Class-meetings may be answered very simply, and the answer will have its application to the second part as well.

You who assert so emphatically the unprofitable and worse than useless nature of Class-meetings, what ground have you for your assertion? Have

you any experience on the subject? Have you ever been to one such meeting? Have you frequently been, so as to get a correct notion of their character? If you have not, what right have you to speak?

Do you suppose that such a vast machinery can be stopped at the word of persons who have no thorough understanding of its nature and efficiency? Would anyone be heard with patience on the subject of army reform who had never been in the army, or, at least, conversed at length with those who had, and whose testimony might be trusted? Are Englishmen, as a rule, apt to use much ceremony with people who talk of things they do not understand? And will you venture to affirm that you understand this?

But you say you have been a member; you have some experience of the Class-meeting. How much? How often did you go? Did you ever make a single effort to improve it? Did you go in a single-minded way, sincerely desirous to get and give? Did you pray for your leader and fellow-members? Before withdrawing, did you ever invite the leader to your house, and in a friendly way mention what seemed to you to be

faults, and suggest a few simple improvements; all in a kindly, earnest spirit?

If you failed to do this, do you think you acted fairly or becomingly, or in such a manner as gives you any right to circulate abuse against the institution you never tried to mend?

Away with all cant and hypocrisy, however subtle and disguised, and by whomsoever indulged! It is quite possible to cant against cant. Let us be true to ourselves, and to the great duties of this involved and perilous life—more involved and perilous now, perhaps, than it ever was. If Methodism does not suit you, go to some other denomination; but if you desire to remain with her, do it heartily and faithfully. Take her for better for worse, for richer for poorer, as men and women daily take each other in a life far more close and intimate than that of the members of the Church. Do you expect to find perfection in any human system any more than in any human being? How can a system be perfect that is composed of imperfect units? Will you endeavour to realise the vain desire by going elsewhere? Whatever section of the Church you join, you will find at least one imperfect member when you get there; and if you

join that in the same spirit with which you leave us, the imperfection will be tolerably decided. Finally, you say your temperament is morbid and self-scrutinising; one on which the Class-meeting exercises a baneful influence.

Allow me to ask if a temperament of this sort is more injured by intercourse with others than by solitary meditation? The very best medicine for such a soul is kindly society, intercourse with others that will take it out of itself, and train it to healthful moods by showing it worse wounds than its own. No morbid spirit should live very much to itself, else it will eat out its own heart, and fill the vacuum with all manner of ugly creatures. It is in every instance for man's happiness and honour that he should not attempt to live unto himself. Selfishness of every description is a weed that spreads with alarming rapidity, and as rapidly impoverishes the soil it preys on. And if Class-meetings were improved and somewhat altered, according to previous suggestions, there would be no room for speaking of them as injurious to morbid, self-probing minds.

With reference to these same hints for improvement, allow me to say that I know they will not be

foreign to some of my readers, and they are all prompted by an affectionate desire for the prosperity of Methodism. No one can be more anxious than myself to have them thoroughly tested and considered.

A gentleman of my acquaintance, when importuned to complete an estimable character by joining himself *de facto* to the Church in which he is a communicant, is fond of replying that he would do so, if he were permitted to go from class to class, meeting now in one, now in another, according to convenience. I have not included this proposal amongst my suggestions for amendment, because it fails to strike me as feasible. If it be ever mentioned in my hearing, I shall meet it by an instance that was related to me one day by the person concerned in it—a Mrs. J—.

We were speaking together on the Class-meeting question, and she told me that soon after she became a member of society, she put her name on the book of a new class. A leader had been appointed, and left to work up a class for himself, and she was one of his first members. Besides herself and the leader, there was for some time only one other, a lad; but the three persevered,

and for three months continued to meet, patiently waiting for livelier times. Her husband, she said, often made goodnatured fun of the small gathering, but the three held on, and were at length rewarded by the addition of others. For three years, however, if I remember right, she was the only woman meeting in that class. Half-hearted Methodist! "Go thou and do likewise;" and then we shall not have again to report a decrease.

"But the Class-meeting is not salvation." No, and there is very little danger that it will be generally so regarded. I am much more concerned lest people should cease to hold it for what it really ought to be,—a great help towards salvation. It is, I admit, quite possible to be pharisaical about it; but people can and will be pharisaical about anything, if the disposition be in them, and be not, by God's grace, battled with and cast out.

Mr. Wesley, speaking of out-door preaching, says in his forcible manner: "The greatest hindrance to this you are to expect from rich, cowardly, or lazy Methodists. But regard them not, neither stewards, leaders, nor people."

Now I am not going to make any present application of these terms. It is not for me to sit in

judgment on those who hang back from the Class-meeting. Many of my friends, and of those from whom I have received kindness, are in this category. It may therefore be taken for granted that I shall not refer in any but the most respectful terms to the persons concerned. Yet may I not be permitted to urge that there is danger always in this world to all of us, that the many influences contrary to earnest, unselfish piety, which are abroad in the world, may creep upon us in their subtlety before we are aware, and may blind our eyes to the true duties of our position. Every Christian should be anxious "to take hold of any Divine hand stretched out to help him through the excitements and the languor, the joy and the sorrow, the storm and the sunshine, of this unintelligible life." And he should be anxious to give this help, also, no less than to take it. The Christian life is still, what it ever was, and ever will be, a girding on of the armour every morning, a lighting of the watchfire every evening. We may well lay hold of all helps we can obtain, and even, as Horace says,—

"To the instruction of a humble friend
Who would himself be better taught, attend."

The demands of business, and the temptations of diversion, come upon us with a force that increases every decade, and with a persuasiveness perhaps peculiar to an age in which the religious life and the carnal life are not separated by such a strong visible line as in the early days of Methodism. Life seems more complex than it used to be; it exercises our judgment to discriminate between the innocent and the hurtful; it makes large demands upon our firmness of principle. This latter was always the case, no doubt. Firmness was needed as much in the old days as now, if discrimination were not. Be this as it may, we shall all agree that the Lord's words have lost none of their force. "If any man would follow Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." Godliness must still be a life of self-denial, of self-abnegating purpose, of holy endeavour. All who bear the name of Christ must remember that they are part of a *household*, members of a *family*, called to be *citizens;* all of which are titles that imply duties towards others, a common interchange of help and counsel, reciprocal and affectionate intercourse, even to such mutual brotherly charities as were

symbolised by the washing of the disciples' feet on the eve of the crucifixion.

"I am not afraid," says Mr. Wesley, "that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in England or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out."

I should not refer thus to the opinion of Mr. Wesley, who was no more infallible than any other man, if I did not believe that the whole history, not only of Methodism, but of Christianity, as well as the currents of social needs, tend to the same issue. I find no indications around me that people are weary of societies, but abundant evidence to the contrary. On all sides, I see people forming themselves into associations for the attainment of every conceivable and inconceivable purpose. Is meat dear? Gentlemen of position and refinement at once combine to buy and kill their own sheep, and convert themselves, for the nonce, into amateur butchers and fellmongers. Or does Government propose a measure for putting a tax

upon the brass ferules of canes and walking-sticks, and in a slumberous midnight hour pass it unnoticed through the House? Instantly what a howl from the makers, vendors, and purchasers of these articles! A society is immediately formed for the repeal of the Act, subscriptions flow in, indignation meetings are held, and the association maintains its ground until its end is gained.

In a thousand other and more serious matters the same principle is seen in active operation. As regards religious or moral purposes, it is seen in associations formerly alluded to, especially in the Order of Good Templars. This, indeed, is nothing else than the main elements of the Methodist organisation, applied to the total abstinence movement. And in one or two particulars it may be said almost to go beyond its model.

I do not mean to assert that the Good Templars have intentionally copied Methodism. I have not the knowledge that would warrant me to assert either that or the reverse. I only desire to refer to their organisation as a signal instance that men are not yet tired of this principle of fraternal associations.

For a means of steadying the unstable, and guiding the newly converted, and arousing the laggard and quickening the careless, I know not of any system half so effectual as ours. It is by this that we have won our present place, and by this that we must gain whatever future triumphs are possible to us. How long Methodism is to endure in Europe and America is, as was said just now, a point we need not debate. We could not settle it if we tried. One thing is certain, that whatever changes another century may bring, Methodism, in its present form, will last long enough to impose upon us the imperative duty of doing all we possibly can—and how much may not that be?—to make it as widely and deeply useful as it is capable of being. Instead of crusading against the Class-meeting, if that has been our habit, let us henceforth crusade for it. If we have always supported it, let us do so more wisely and more faithfully than heretofore, remembering that "no virtue is safe that is not enthusiastic."

The position of other Churches affords no argument against us, since there is considerable evidence that they feel the need of a system analagous

to ours, and are making efforts to attain it. Especially is this true of that Church which most resembles our own, viz., the Presbyterian.

It has come to this point. Are we to abandon an institution so proved and honoured in the past, so widely useful in the present, because for a short time it has not made the progress it was wont to do? If business men always followed this policy of abandoning a scheme at the first suspicion of failure, there would be many more crashes than there are in the commercial world. If captain and crew made off from every vessel that springs a leak, or cracks a boiler, there would many times be a wreck of that which is now brought safely into port. Everybody knows that in commercial ventures, a courageous determination not to sell out, and a wise and thorough investigation of the books, will not only save that which seemed to be on the verge of ruin, but will often re-establish it in public opinion, and give it a new lease of even added prosperity.

Now we are in no such desperate circumstances as these similes would imply; but we may call upon all Methodists to show the spirit described. A steady resolution to stand by the concern, a

prudent but enlightened reform in administration, where reform is needed, and withal, an earnest supplication of the Divine Power: let there be this, and the tide will soon turn, and instead of abandoning our system we shall have other churches desiring to copy it.

And we must not forget, despite all that has been said on the reluctance of educated people to meet in class, that, after all, there are in Methodism thousands of such people who do meet in class, and lead classes, and are earnest defenders of the institution. It is necessary, perhaps, to remind ourselves of this fact.

And to those educated persons who do object to the Class-meeting, and wish to abolish it, I would just repeat the little sentence quoted in an earlier chapter from *Gates Ajar*. "It raises the question in my mind whether cultivated Christians generally are sufficiently Christian cultivators, scattering their golden gifts on way-side ground."

A question we do well to consider. If *power*, to the very last particle of it, be *duty*, to quote again from a very different writer (John Foster), and if, to refer to yet higher oracles, "of those to whom much has been given will be required the more;"

if the whole tenor of Christ's teaching be that in the great assize he will deal with men according to the powers bestowed upon them, then there can be but one conclusion for persons who plume themselves upon their cultivation and their taste.

That we who possess refined tastes, and a strong æsthetic faculty, whose whole leanings are towards dignity, solemnity, and composure in religious exercises, should shrink from whatever offends this part of our nature, and should find it trying and somewhat irksome to join in devotional meetings with those of opposite feelings and habits; this is not at all wonderful. It would be surprising if it were not so. While we are in the body, and compassed with the infirmities of mortality, it must be so; we can no more help it than we can help our knees aching, if the prayers are too long, or our throats getting dry, if the praises are too protracted. As long as we are in this fleshly tabernacle, and bound to a frail and fallen organisation, we must suffer many hindrances which we may, perhaps, in part subdue but cannot altogether annihilate. We require food, sleep, and change at certain intervals, and if they be not given, the unfortunate body cries

out, and impedes alike our business, our pleasure, and our devotions until it be satisfied. The weakened and wearied flesh, by its mysterious intercommunication with the spirit, makes that faint and languid also until its partner is refreshed. Thus all unduly protracted services and labours are an evil which nullify their own attempts. We cannot sunder soul from body, and the attempt to do so is worse than useless. All *unnatural* repression of natural appetite is written in the history of human error with wormwood and with gall. And confusion must attend all less violent but similarly prompted efforts, to treat human beings as pure spirits. Men and women are not like lamps, which may be fed at any irregular intervals, so long as they contain a sufficient modicum of oil to prevent the flame from expiring in the wick. Our mental and spiritual food can no more be taken in this way than our physical nutriment can. We must submit, to a certain extent, to the dominion of the body.

Of course the word dominion is used here in a limited sense. R. H. Hutton finely says, "The unclean slave and the free child of heaven

are both within us." So to yield to the physical nature as to give it the mastery is utter ruin; but in order that the higher nature may maintain its clearness, purity, and strength it must allow the lawful needs of its companion to be satisfied. And just as these physical necessities are, in a certain sense, supreme, and must be satisfied, so there are cravings of the mental and moral nature which assert themselves with almost equal force, and cry out imperatively for food. Either for that kind of food they desire, or against that which does not suit them. It is a truism, and yet a truism we must repeat, in order to prepare the way for further remarks, that men differ as much, and as innocently, in their spiritual as in their physical configuration. And yet, truism as this is, how often assertions are put forth which would lead one to think that the speakers supposed men to be made by themselves. Not that we judge our own idiosyncrasies in this fashion. We are always ready to give ourselves the benefit of the dictum that no man's peculiarities of temper and taste are his own choice. It is only in judging others that we forget this truth.

A truth it is, more completely than we often stay to remember. In all the millions of mortal souls existing on this planet no two are just alike; differences subtle and numerous occur in organisations that at first appear almost exactly alike. And all this endless diversity of variation, ranging from the highest to the lowest details, is a part of that providential arrangement for which none are responsible, and to which all must submit. The distinctions of race, colour, physical capability, size, weight, temper, habit, inclination, desire, are manifold beyond mention; and while they are utterly beyond the control of any individual in the world, are most arbitrary in their influence over his destiny and efforts. It is no wonder that heathens should conceive the idea of a relentless Fate, weaving the web of man's destiny in a stony indifference to his wishes, or that sceptical philosophers should entertain a belief of fixed natural laws, blindly working in utter contempt of human cravings. We are, and ever must be, in many important particulars, what our destiny makes us. The Hindoo must eat his rice, and toil beneath his burning sky, and be trained in the social

customs of the East, and wear a bronzed skin, and express his emotions in Tamil or some dialect of Hindoostan. He cannot help himself in these matters

The Englishman, on the other hand, though a citizen of the same empire, governed by the same laws, and owning the some sovereign, finds himself in totally different circumstances; which yet exercise over him an equally arbitrary sway. He has a white skin, he eats meat and puddings, he lives amongst fogs and sleet, and he is a member of a bustling northern society, as different from that of Oriental lands as can well be imagined. Instead of Oriental submission, its smooth demeanour and slumbering ferocity, its supine and reverential temper, he feels the stirring of a vigorous energy, an ambitious, self-asserting temper that will submit to nothing which it cannot acknowledge as a rightful sovereign, and which strives for ever against the constraining or repressing influences of its condition.

Social, domestic, and civil institutions, which he had no hand in forming, do their part from infancy to mould his character, and he cannot,

strive as he may, altogether help himself. He must be content to express his emotions and reflections in English, and to be an Englishman, as his fellow subject must be a Hindoo.

We all know this. Whatever influence we justly ascribe to the Gospel, we have more common sense than to suppose that it will do away or was ever meant to do away with those distinctions of race—involving so much difference in temper and habit—which were fixed by the same power that sent the Gospel.

And if race distinctions, subtle, strong, and wonderful beyond all our powers of apprehension, are thus, in a certain and perfectly real sense, fixed unalterably upon us, it is no less true to say that more personal characteristics of constitution and inclination are a heritage we cannot sell from us if we would. One man is emotional, another impassive; one impetuous, another sedate; one ardent, another cool; one sensitive, another lymphatic; one variable, another placid. And to the end of time these varying tempers will never wholly comprehend each other.

There will always be a slight degree of

mutual perplexity and misunderstanding. A strong will, or a powerful chain of events, will sometimes seem to change a character, but I should incline to think that they do not touch the springs of it, except so far as religion will alter the object of a man's purposes and desires, and so, by degrees, assimilate his thoughts.

Of course, all that has been said of the tyranny of circumstance is only true to a certain extent, and depends upon the force of energy in an individual. Yet there we must pause. Who implants that energy of will? Why do we call it "native energy?" What do we mean by speaking of "natural sweetness of temper," of "innate nobility of disposition," or of "ingrained vice" and "inherent youthful depravity?" Surely, without trenching upon the awfully true and demonstrated fact of the depravity of our nature, and the innate tendency to evil that lurks within us, there is no room for questioning that the element of good varies in different characters; and that, while all are responsible for improvement of nature, some find in their constitution a comparatively plastic and others a more obstinate material. Native energy can

certainly be held no incorrect term. But in this, as in all other instances, power is duty. We must conclude, then, that it is neither kind nor right to gird at the sensibilities of our neighbours. We do, in our own case, give full weight to the idiosyncrasies of varying temperaments. We make full allowance for the smallest of our own peculiarities. Let us act towards others in the same spirit, "doing to others as we would that they should do unto us," and not forgetting that some of these peculiarities—those which come under the head of failings—are more trying to their possessor than they are to us.

But passing by all failings of temper and such-like imperfections of character, let us consider more especially those inclinations of taste, those sensitive and fastidious feelings, which sometimes incline their possessor to withdraw from intercourse with others, because such intercourse only displeases these fine instincts.

No man can rid himself of these sensibilities. They are as much an essential part of himself as his skin, hair, and features. How

absurd it is to hold any other view! Take Smith, now, who is of a lymphatic physique. He is generally chilly, rarely finds any summer too warm for him, and is not easily irritated by those pestilent insects that in warm weather are the plague of other people's lives.

Jones, on the contrary, is of full-blooded physical habit, prone to feel heat acutely, and sensitive as a mimosa to the least touch. The slightest rash puts him into a fever of suppresed irritation; flies, not to mention wasps, drive him to the verge of insanity; and a close atmosphere affects him as much as it usually affects delicate women. Whereas Smith scarcely feels for the most part that he has a body; or would not, save for its craving of warmth; and he could almost breathe mephitic air: a swarm of wasps scarcely attracts his attention.

Now neither of these people made themselves. If they had been consulted they would no doubt have desired that some alteration might be made, but as things are they must just make the best of them and be thankful that they are no worse.

Then the two differ quite as much in artistic,

literary, and social inclinations. Smith is reserved almost to a fault, yet has an air of frankness that deceives many. Jones, on the other hand, with a serious manner, is open and affectionate. He is no student; Smith is. He can accommodate himself easily to the habits and wishes of others; Smith cannot. And so the infinite variations go on, and with them all there are frequent similarities of aim and thought.

Now these ingrained and ineradicable differences may be modified by the influence of religion, but they cannot be destroyed, neither can they be weeded out of the constitution of humanity. They are apt, too, to exert themselves very powerfully in connection with religion, that being a matter which touches closely the finest part of every human soul. Religion, also, as it enters into every part of a man's existence, and affects all his pursuits and habits, must needs receive, in turn, some colouring from his own individuality. We cannot, nor would we dare, adapt religious truth to suit our own notions of what it should be; but every man, of necessity, looks at it from his own stand point, and receives it in his own way. Thus, individual peculiarities,

so long as they are innocent, cannot be excluded from the Church. Religion is not the paint that makes all wood look alike; rather is it the Divine Hand which carves out of the most various materials forms of beauty and of worth. The Church is to include all and use all. It is to be the home of the studious and the adventurous, the reserved and the communicative, and to bring together, in one household bond, minds and manners the most diverse.

So far from concluding that religion should repress natural differences, we know that the contact of differing minds and tastes is the most valuable element in the training of human beings. As in the family life of the domestic circle, so in the family life of God's household, minds and tempers act and re-act upon each other, and by so doing produce the most valuable results.

Solitude does not effect this. We all know the frequent result of being "an only child." Want of companionship, and of the rough-and-ready discipline that children exercise over each other, is apt to produce selfishness and morbid self-consciousness. Sensibility is unnaturally developed, care for others is stultified for want of

exercise, and all the fastidiousness, and what is commonly called the fidgettiness of the character, is unwholesomely fostered. All people who live to themselves and by themselves are prone to develop those dispositions which make them troublesome to their fellows. We are so constituted that each of us has idiosyncrasies differing more or less from those of our friends and neighbours, and these are part of our very selves and cannot be discarded; nay, ought not, since the wisdom of God created us with them; they can only be trained. But we are also constituted to rely upon and associate with each other; we need, more or less, the companionship and counsel of our fellow men; and it is ordained that in this companionship and counsel we are to find great mutual profit; the different elements of character are kept in their right place, and prevented from assuming, any of them, undue proportions.

In mutual contact, if we learn each other's faults, we learn each other's virtues too, and are made to feel that we have no right to stand aloof from our fellows because of the defects we find in them. We learn, too, very

often, that some who have had nothing from us but contempt are, in reality, as to one virtue at least, our superiors, and that, perhaps, in a point which we must confess important. We see, sometimes, the silent struggle, and the timid or resolute effort. We learn somewhat of temptations that pertain to other peculiarities of temperament than our own, and we are driven back upon our souls with the questions: Do I bear the fight as steadily or as bravely? Are not my temptations fewer, and my capabilities greater than those of my comrades?

Think of Madame Guyon relinquishing the most sacred duties that can devolve upon any human being, and giving up into the hands of others a charge which she ought to have seen was hers and hers only, until God who gave it took it from her This action—not peculiar to herself, but shared by many another in the olden times—was done, as we know, because, poor woman! she thought that to devote herself to religion and "save her soul," and fulfil her "vocation," she must separate from her children. Our "vocation" is the daily duty that comes to our hand, and if we can't save our souls in the doing of

that God will find us no other way. It was the misery of unnumbered thousands, in the early and middle ages, that this simple, healthy, straightforward and intelligible Christian vocation was no vocation to them, but a temptation to carnality. Finding it hard to be in the world and yet not of it, mixed up with men yet not swayed from the right by that contact, they concluded that because it was so difficult it was not the highest Christian life; and they fled to the monastery and the convent, that, in company with a select few who shared their own enthusiasm, they might purify themselves from sin, and grow into the image of God.

How this experiment too often ended, we know. How it must always have worked is clear enough. God save this country from ever repeating, on any scale, such an experiment of miserable error! There is not a notion more fatal to pure and healthy national religion than that which teaches a double religious life: one for the few, and another for the many. In Roman Catholicism, the error has always prevailed which teaches a higher and a lower vocation; one for *les devotes*, the other for the mass of mankind. And on a

par with this is the belief so widely spread in Europe to-day, as it was in Greece and Rome two thousand years ago, that there is one creed for the educated, another for the illiterate. We hope there is no serious danger of such a development of this principle amongst us as there is in France, and as there was in the nations of antiquity. There are symptoms of its presence in English society,—and they are amongst the very gravest symptoms of the hour, containing, as they do, the seeds of national ruin. Let us beware of harbouring any notion that is at all kindred to this.

There is but one religion, and one set of religious principles. There is but one plan of life based upon these, and that is the surrender of the whole spiritual nature to the control and inspiration of the Divine Spirit; and then, as flowing from this, the permeating of every act of earthly duty with that love which the soul draws from God. To some may be assigned duties more directly bearing on religion than those which fall to others; but in the Christian Church there can be no lower and higher life. There is but one eternal life proceeding from the

Father and the Son, and revealed in His life who prayed: "I in them, and thou in Me, . . . that they may be made perfect in one even as we are one."

The Christian life is a united, helpful life, or it is nothing. While there are in it heights and depths which the purest intellect can never fathom, it is simple enough for the most uncultured and imperfect. And while the refined, and the æsthetic, and the learned can never feel that they are anything but needy mortals like their less favoured brethren, there is yet a wealth of power and beauty which they, with their better trained and keener faculties, more readily discover and appreciate. Cultivation, and refinement, and all the other fruits of civilisation, are nothing but a curse when they lead to a denial of the pure, simple, humble spirit of Christianity; they are a grand possession when they are all brought into the service of the Church, and made to contribute to the well-being of every member. For the Church needs them. She requires, as we said before, the finest and most perfect tools to do her work. In this household every disposition has its part to play. And it is a matter

of experience to everyone who has done any Christian work that it is, as a rule, done best by the best educated.

Do not misunderstand this. An earnest, warm-hearted man, burning with zeal, and shrewd in applying truth, is a far better instrument than the refined man of scruples, whose fastidiousness is continually hindering his efforts, and whose faith is perhaps less simple. "Not many wise, not many noble have called you." And yet how great a work has been wrought!

But given the same earnestness and devotion, with the added grasp of truth and felicity of illustration that are the fruit of mental culture—and see what a result you have then! Let our weapons be forged from the very best metal at our command, and our fortifications reared of homely earth and rocks; and these combined powers will resist the world. We want both the shrewd mother-wit and practical piety of the unlearned, and the argumentative power and wide insight of the scholar: and we want this in every department of work.

Thank God! in Methodism we have much of this combined action. More, perhaps, here than

in any other section of Christ's Church do the educated and unpolished work together, with blessed result. But we need much more of it. The truth of the *family* and *citizen* nature of religious life is not realised by many persons in our congregations as it should be. They encourage themselves in the notion that the Class-meeting is a very unnecessary institution for these times, and that they are doing well to oppose it, since by so doing they are helping to banish it, and to bring in the day when it will no longer exist as a test of membership. Let them well understand that if this day is ever to come, it is as yet very far off; that were it to come, it would probably be, not the deliverance, but the complete disruption of our societies. And, meanwhile, they, as individuals, are spending their short term of mortal service in fostering the dangerous and erroneous belief that the spiritual life of educated and uneducated, of rich and poor, is too diverse to be supplied through one church organisation. They are putting from them, for unworthy motives, the work which the Master makes ready to their hand, and entreats them to do. How much longer will they suffer this to

be true? Will they continue to hold back from the vineyard where they would often know so well how to tend the vines and to extract the wealthy juice? Their culture, their information, is all needed in the Class-meeting. In the improvements suggested a while back their aid would be most valuable, if given in a faithful hearty spirit. We do not want to lose one plain labourer, one untaught—but not unskilled—vinedresser. These can be as useful as ever they were; but all are wanted. What! in the Father's house are the best informed and most highly educated children to sit dumb and useless? Are you not all complaining—with what reason, I say not,—that your most accomplished daughters are often the most useless in the family, and that the old-fashioned virtues of sewing and housewifery are found wanting in some cases when every other accomplishment can be displayed? However true, or untrue, this may be socially, it is too often true religiously. While there are a host of distinguished examples to the contrary, there are, also, sadly too many to whom the description applies. I pray you, friends, let it apply no longer!

But you say, "I do work as far as you will let me. I go to the Sunday-school and I serve on Committees, or I manage Mother's meetings and collect subscriptions. Only you insist upon this meeting in class, and until I agree to that you will not give me anything else to do."

We cannot. We are glad that you do so much, that to all these important works you are lending a hand. Maybe, you are doing more than we thought for. But you are keeping outside the family, you are refusing to bear your part in the civic life, and we are bound to tell you that we must abide by the principle which we hold to be a true one, and must wait until you come over to us. We want such as you in the Class-meeting, to widen its culture and make it more attractive and profitable than it is, to assist in working it, which you could do so well if you tried, and to fulfil the Divine plan by joining all the family in one harmonious bond.

"Your place in the ranks awaits you,
Each man has a part to play."

Come and take it up! We believe that you are attached to the Master, that you desire to

do something for Him, and that you feel you ought not to be hanging outside the household. Resolve, then, that you will, at least, candidly try the experiment before you finally reject our system. If you do try it candidly and steadily we have not much fear of the result.

You say you like calm, reverent, solemn religious exercises, and that the unrestrained noise of many prayer-meetings makes you shrink from entering a Class-meeting. That may be true enough; but do you suppose all Class-meetings are a mere hour's ranting? Can you find no leader whose character will be security against confusion? And if at times there is something that strikes discordantly on your finer sense, can you not endure it? Remember that to vehement, untutored persons, your subdued manner is as distasteful as their noise is to you. Well then, you say, let us keep apart, and so avoid annoying each other. Not so, altogether. That you should always be together would be good for neither of you; but that you should sometimes meet on common ground, not only for public worship, but for fraternal intercourse, is, we believe, part of the Divine purpose, and cannot be

abrogated. And because it is so, we believe that the purpose is beneficial, and that profit to all may and should arise from the communion.

Without this bond of union religious societies are mere disintegrating masses, wanting all the support and help that is found in combination. Individual members float loosely on the surface, and drift continually farther from each other. Rich and poor, cultivated and untaught, instead of bringing their various powers into one fund for mutual improvement, and lacking this cohering principle, separate from each other, and by that separation lose infinitely. It has been well said that men are responsible for idle silence, no less than for idle speech. Would that we remembered this better!

There is one incident in the life of our Lord, in the accounts of which occur one or two remarkable and pregnant expressions.

"Then Jesus, beholding him, loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest; go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me."

If, in interpreting these words, we cling solely

to ideas of gold or lands in connection with the selling spoken of, and to mere giving of money, food, or clothes in connection with the ministration to the poor, we shall miss that wider meaning which makes Scripture valuable for all times.

Renunciation of self must be entire, surrender to the law of Christ must be supreme. What is that law? The law of love. What kind of love? Brotherly and helpful. Do we yet know all that is implied in the Fatherhood of God, and the brotherhood, the fellowship of saints?

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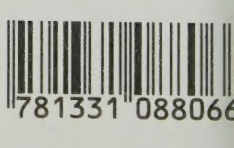

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